
Jonathan Zimmerman

In June 1944, a delegation of African-American leaders met with New York City school officials to discuss a central focus of black concern: history textbooks. That delegation reflected a broad spectrum of metropolitan Black opinion: Chaired by the radical city councilman Benjamin J. Davis, it included the publisher of the Amsterdam News—New York's major Black newspaper—as well as the bishop of the African Orthodox Church. In a joint statement, the delegates praised public schools' recent efforts to promote "intercultural education"—and to reduce "prejudice"—via drama, music, and art. Yet if history texts continued to spread lies about the past, Blacks insisted, all of these other programs would come to naught. One book described slaves as "happy"; another applauded the Ku Klux Klan for keeping "foolish Negroes" out of government. "Such passages . . . could well have come from the mouths of the fascist enemies of our nation," the Black delegation warned. Even as America fought "Nazi doctrine" overseas, African Americans maintained, the country needed to purge this philosophy from history books at home.¹

The following year New Yorkers poured into the streets to celebrate victory over Germany and Japan. Yet in the public schools, African Americans complained, children still used the same racist textbooks. Blacks took special aim at White liberals who supported antiprejudice programs but turned a blind eye to prejudiced texts.² Indeed, school superintendent

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¹"Statement of Principle" (ms, 15 June 1944), frames 265-66; press release by Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., 15 June 1944, frame 264, both in reel 22, Part 16B, Papers of the National Association For the Advancement of Colored People (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1994).

²Following social scientists Paul M. Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines, this essay uses "liberal" to connote Americans who shared four basic values: "commitment to equality, belief in the efficacy of government as a [sic] agent of social change, openness to change, and

History of Education Quarterly Vol. 44 No. 1 Spring 2004
John E. Wade—himself a strong advocate of “intercultural education”—was the author of a text that extolled the KKK. The problem afflicted every subject in the curriculum, not just history. Music books featured songs calling African Americans “darkeys”; literature anthologies repeatedly referred to them as “coons” or “Sambos”; and geography texts, including one book by Wade’s successor as city school chief, William E. Jansen, stressed the barbarity of Africa. “One need not go to the Southland to find that Negroes are ill-treated in textbooks,” despaired the New York Age, another Black newspaper. “If gross misconceptions are learned by the children in the schools of New York City . . . what can one expect in other sections of the country where many are still ‘fighting the Civil War?’"

Over the next two decades, “the Southland” would answer with a single phrase, “Whites Only.” Especially after the Supreme Court issued its 1954 challenge to segregation in Brown v. Board of Education, Whites below the Mason-Dixon Line stepped up their efforts to eliminate any mention of African Americans from their own textbooks. In the North, meanwhile, Blacks continued to struggle, with little success, to remove the slurs and outright lies that still marred so-called “integrated” texts. Their efforts would not bear fruit until the early 1960s when African Americans developed a new strategy of protest. Borrowing directly from Brown, they argued that racist textbooks, like segregated classrooms, were “psychologically damaging” to black children. Tempering their older concerns with white bigotry, African Americans used the jargon of social psychology to argue that textbooks injured Black self-concept, Black self-identification, and especially Black self-esteem. Quoting the prominent anthropologist Margaret Mead, Philadelphia Black activist Horace Woodland declared in 1963, “A people classed as a minority group has a need for a place in history to sustain their belief in their value.” Until textbooks provided a “positive image”


of African Americans, Woodland added, Black children would continue to suffer a "sense of inferiority." The new textbook strategy reflected much deeper currents in American political culture, which increasingly defined public problems in terms of their impact upon the individual psyche. By 1967, even Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey would warn that racist textbooks were permanently scarring Black minds. "We have no way of knowing how many potential Negro scientists, scholars, doctors, teachers, and businessmen have been swept into the ditch of oblivion by the psychological backlash of the Negro history gap," cautioned Humphrey, connecting the textbook peril to the alleged "missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union. Like other Cold War liberals, Humphrey viewed domestic race issues through the prism of international relations: To defeat "communist totalitarian forces" across the ocean, he argued, America needed to insure "basic civil rights" on its own shores. As Humphrey's remarks on textbooks illustrated, meanwhile, liberals also framed racial discrimination as a scourge upon the mental and emotional health of its victims. Whereas racism injured America's national image on the world stage, in short, it injured African-Americans' self-image at home.


"Vice President Humphrey Advocates the Study of Negro History by All Americans," 113 Cong., 1 sess., Feb. 15, 1967, p. 3488. Published in Negro Digest, a popular African-American periodical, Humphrey's remarks were read into the Congressional Record by Michigan lawmaker John Conyers.

This article uses struggles over school textbooks to probe America’s postwar discourse about race, highlighting the shift towards psychological modes of explanation and remedy. The first section examines debates in the North during the 1940s and early 1950s when a new cohort of African-American freedom fighters—the so-called “World War II Generation”—faced off against liberal white educators. Stressing the irrational nature of prejudice, Whites dismissed textbooks as irrelevant to the formation of anti-Black views; but Blacks themselves placed texts at the center of their analysis, claiming that schoolbooks helped justify and perpetuate White bigotry. The focus of the article then shifts to the South where segregationists’ defense of all-white texts, and their resistance to so-called “integrated” ones, seemed to confirm the critical role of racist texts in fostering racist attitudes. The final section explains how African Americans refocused the entire textbook debate upon their attitudes, echoing the larger theme of Brown v. Board of Education. Pressuring publishers and school boards across the 1960s, blacks brought forth a new set of texts that aimed to counter their alleged sense of racial inferiority.

Their efforts also counter a popular historical narrative about the rise of modern multiculturalism, which is frequently linked to a post-1960s rejection of Brown’s integrationist dream in favor of a divisive “identity politics.” But concerns with racial identity and self-esteem dominated the textbook campaign from the time of Brown itself, which phrased its appeal for integration in explicitly psychological terms. The text campaign scored

Recently, historians have emphasized the critical role of World War II in galvanizing the black quest for civil rights. Indeed, the entire lens of civil-rights scholarship has shifted backwards 20 years, from the better-known “1960s generation” to their forebears in the 1940s. See, e.g., Steven F. Lawson, Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 1-28; Takaki, Double Victory, 22-57; Adam Fairclough, Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2001 (New York: Viking, 2001), 181-226.


To be sure, a concern for racial identity marked textbook campaigns by Carter G. Woodson—the so-called “Father of Negro History”—in the 1920s and 1930s. Woodson focused his interwar efforts mainly upon segregated black schools in the South, where he promoted special history texts (including his own monographs) for “Negro History” elective courses. After World War II and the defeat of fascism, however, Woodson declared a new
some impressive victories, forcing the removal of racist slurs as well as the insertion of new material about minorities. Yet the gains came at a cost. Demanding a laudatory history that would heal the Black psyche, activists sometimes pressed their own distortions upon the nation’s textbooks. Even more, they provided an unintended crutch for an old but resilient enemy—racism. Increasingly, white conservatives argued that any negative material about their own past would harm their delicate mental health. So did every other racial and ethnic group, each seeking its own immaculate stripe in the multicultural rainbow. The result was a curriculum that celebrated “race” and “diversity” but downplayed racism. Designed to heal the psychological scourge of American prejudice, multiculturalism would help repress its historical roots.

In the North: Black Americans versus Intergroup Education

In 1946, America’s premier Black organization praised the nation’s burgeoning movement for intercultural education. Writing on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), spokesman Roy Wilkins lauded school-based efforts to instill “an appreciation of all the races which go to make up America.”

Intercultural education dated to the 1920s when pacifist Rachel Davis DuBois designed scattered school projects and curricula around the country to underscore the “gifts” —by which she meant the cultures and achievements—of different ethnic groups. In the wake of World War II, however, that movement shifted its

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1 Roy Wilkins, “Next Steps in Education for Racial Understanding,” Education (Jan. 1946), fiche 004.909-1, SCF.

focus from ethnicity to race and, especially, to African Americans. Two million Blacks migrated to the urban North and West in the 1940s, which crackled with tension and violence; in 1943 alone, social scientists reported 242 "racial battles" in 47 cities. Schools scrambled to respond, as several educators wrote, by sponsoring special assemblies and other activities to spawn "good will and mutual understanding among different racial and nationality groups." By 1946, more than 4,000 schools in 22 states had instituted some brand of intercultural education or, as it soon became known, "intergroup education."

The difference was not entirely semantic. As fascism enveloped Europe, DuBois's notion of distinctive ethnoracial "gifts" bore a dangerous echo to Nazi race doctrine. Even more, the rise of Nazism seemed to demonstrate the irrational nature of racism itself. Rather than emphasizing the special qualities of different Americans, postwar intergroup educators tended to stress common national attributes. Like their cousins in the booming field of social psychology, educators also underscored the emotional, even reflexive character of "tolerance" and "prejudice" alike. "Knowledge alone does not affect either our feeling or thinking as effectively as we assume," warned intergroup educators Hilda Taba and William Van Til in 1945. In the classroom teachers should design hands-on activities in "democratic living"—via games, skits, and songs—and downplay textbooks which merely dispensed "factual information." The new approach was neatly captured in the title of a 1954 workshop for teachers, social workers, and other professionals: "People Are Our Textbooks."

According to historians of "Whiteness," World War II marked the final stage in the transformation of European "ethnics" into White people. Whether or not these scholars exaggerate the degree of race-based hostility that ethnics suffered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it seems clear that European immigrants became less noticeable—and more "White"—in the World War II era. Dialogues on race concentrated almost exclusively upon two supposedly undifferentiated populations, "Negroes" and "whites." Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color (Harvard University Press, 1998), 247, 258; Philip Gleason, "Americans All," in idem., Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 155; Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," International Labor and Working-Class History 60 (Fall 2002): 3-32, esp. 13-14.


From its inception, African Americans were strong supporters of intercultural education. Rachel DuBois corresponded frequently in the interwar years with George Washington Carver (a centerpiece of her curriculum unit on “The Negro’s Contribution”) and with NAACP officials William Pickens and W. E. B. Du Bois. After World War II, meanwhile, the NAACP threw its weight behind a wide variety of intergroup projects. The New York office sponsored eighty-three meetings at junior high schools in 1946 to commemorate the recently deceased Wendell Wilkie and his “One World” campaign; in Minnesota, NAACP representatives led student discussions about fair employment practices; and in several other cities, branches held assemblies based on the popular pamphlet *The Races of Mankind*. Coauthored by anthropologist Ruth Benedict, that pamphlet used scientific arguments and evidence to refute racial and ethnic stereotypes. Atop the national NAACP, finally, officials appointed field secretary Noma Jensen to traverse the country on behalf of intergroup education. In 1945 Jensen would visit schools in a dozen cities and deliver over eighty speeches.16

Within this intergroup nexus, however, one important characteristic distinguished Blacks from their White allies—an overriding concern with textbooks. Whereas Whites dismissed texts as irrelevant to prejudice, Blacks viewed the books as a chief cause of it. To African Americans, any successful battle against bigotry would require the removal, or at least the revision, of racist books. “I do not say that a change in our anti-Negro textbooks will kill prejudice, but I am convinced that it is a major step in that direction,” Black journalist Frank Davis wrote in 1943. “The white youth [who] grows to maturity learning the truth will not be disposed to impart the old myths to his offspring, nor will he be a fertile field for white supremacy.” Across the urban North, Davis added, recent Black arrivals were flooding to the polls; between 1940 and 1948, the number of registered Black voters doubled. If Blacks demanded “fair and honest textbooks,” then

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Brown-ing the American Textbook

Educators would have to take heed. "There is no sound reason why enfranchised Negroes with their White friends can't change this textbook situation," Davis concluded.17

Throughout the 1940s, African Americans pressured northern officials to alter racist texts. In New York City, the NAACP reviewed local books and publicized their most hateful passages; in Albany it asked state legislators for a resolution opposing bias in the texts; and in Chicago it called upon the school board to replace "ex-slave-owners' histories" with "scientific" ones. Contrary to Davis's predictions, however, White educators—even self-described "race liberals" and "intergroup experts"—ignored these appeals. Citing new psychological research, some officials argued that textbooks could not influence prejudice; others attributed Black complaints to "hypersensitivity," itself a symptom of the psychological damage that prejudice had wrought. Confronted by an angry Black parent in 1950 about a history text that defended the Ku Klux Klan, one educator asked the parent, "Are you sure you are not reading into the text something which was not intended?" Another official scoffed at complaints against the elementary school folktale Little Black Sambo, a frequent character in elementary school readers and a frequent target of Black attacks. "[S]he thought it was cute," an outraged NAACP member reported, "and when she had read it to her children they had been very sorry for Little Sambo."18

As the last example indicates, Black concerns about American textbooks extended far beyond the history curriculum. In 1950, for example, Blacks in New York blasted a geography text that praised colonialism in Africa. "Because the native people . . . are very backward," the text declared, "the greater part of the continent has come under the control of European nations." Other critics condemned biology textbooks, which often reflected eugenic theories of racial hierarchy. Still other Blacks attacked music textbooks for including songs by Stephen Foster, complete with Foster's original lexicon—"darkey," "nigger," and so on. In 1952 the Illinois NAACP invited Black opera legend Marian Anderson to attend a program on "the Negro in music" at the state's annual convention. Besides entertaining the

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17Frank Marshall Davis, "Now is Strategic Time to Start Improving Our School Textbooks," Kansas City Call, 6 April 1943, frame 119, reel 83, Tuskegee Institute News Clipping File (Tuskegee: Carver Research Foundation, 1978); Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," 786.

audience, that program aimed at "improving the school curricula and relieving the children of all races ... from the Stephen Foster songs," an NAACP official told Anderson.\textsuperscript{19}

Blacks also registered frequent complaints about bigoted literature books, starting with the infamous \textit{Little Black Sambo}. No classroom text caused more consternation among African Americans than this primary school tale, which described the jungle adventures of a dark (and ostensibly "Indian") boy who outwits several predatory tigers. Just like racist history textbooks, a Black leader in Washington, D.C. argued, \textit{Little Black Sambo} "violates one of the first rules of intercultural education: mutual respect for the cultures involved." To White school officials, however, the story would promote—not inhibit—this very goal. "Far from casting ridicule, the story builds up better racial understanding," district school superintendent Hobart M. Corning told the local NAACP. Besides, Corning added, the story was "part of the racial heritage of America." If schools removed every book "which might be construed ... as derogatory to some groups," the nation would soon have very little "heritage" left.\textsuperscript{20}

Here Corning received glowing plaudits from Washington’s White liberal establishment, including the \textit{Washington Post}. The Post had long fought "racial discrimination" in Washington, it proudly noted, endorsing Black campaigns for equal facilities in public schools. Yet “there is such a thing as damaging a good cause by pressing it to the point of absurdity,” the Post warned, denouncing Blacks' "humorless touchiness" about \textit{Little Black Sambo}. “Sambo” was based upon a novel about an Indian boy, the Post noted, not a Black one; he was an “entirely sympathetic character,” outsmarting several vicious tigers; and besides, every work of literature appeared to offend one ethnic group or another. The Jonathan Swift masterpiece \textit{Gulliver's Travels} mocked Catholics and Anglicans, \textit{Robinson Crusoe} "seems to disparage the social status of Carib Indians," \textit{Mother Goose} contained "a scandalous libel against the Welsh," and so on. “To insist that Negroes be given equal rights with other citizens is one thing; to insist that their


particular sensibilities entitle them to exercise a kind of censorship is quite another," the Post concluded.21

Among avowedly liberal textbook authors, finally, Black complaints fell on deaf or disdainful ears. Starting in 1950, for example, African Americans petitioned well-known race liberals Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Eliot Morison to revise their popular textbook, *Growth of the American Republic*, which declared that the American slave—or "Sambo," as the text called him—was "adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy." Privately, the authors joked about Black complaints—"bushman squawks," Morison called them—against their book. "Felix the nigger-baiter is funny!" Morison told Commager, using the latter's nickname. Miffed by attacks upon his own liberal credentials, Morison stressed that his daughter was married to Jewish NAACP President Joel Spingarn—and that "Sambo" had been Morison's childhood nickname. Eventually, Morison agreed to remove the term "pickanninies"; in future editions, he quipped, Black children would be described only as "nice little seal-brown darlings." But he insisted upon retaining "Sambo," "Uncle Daniel," and several other images of slave docility. "I'll be damned if I'll take them out for . . . anybody," Morison told Commager.22

Yet White liberals overlooked two important dimensions of the Black textbook critique in the early postwar period. First, Blacks generally based their complaints upon history—that is, upon scholarly knowledge—rather than upon "emotion" or "sensitivity" as patronizing Whites often claimed. Textbooks that sugarcoated slavery or praised the KKK were not merely insulting, Blacks insisted; they were also inaccurate. In New York, for example, NAACP members conducted a study that compared textbook accounts of "happy," Sambo-like slaves to scholarly works by Black historian Carter G. Woodson. "This study was made not on a basis of racial sensitiveness or pride," emphasized NAACP secretary Walter White, "but on the highest plane of historical accuracy and objectivity." Chicago text critics cited W. E. B. Du Bois' 1935 classic *Black Reconstruction*, which undercut the long-held shibboleth that Blacks had "looted" the South—and that the KKK had "saved" it—after the Civil War. Blacks even pleaded with Du Bois's

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publisher to release a second edition of his book, which had gone out of print in the early 1940s.\(^3\)

Meanwhile, Black text activists aimed mainly to diminish White prejudice rather than to protect Black egos, despite White charges of “hypersensitivity.” To be sure, Washington, D.C. Black leader Stephen G. Spottswood admitted, Blacks resented the term “Sambo,” just as Italians despised “Dago” and Jews detested “Christ Killer.” But the real reason to remove the *Little Black Sambo* tale from schools lay in its effect upon Whites, not upon Blacks. If White children absorbed the story’s message of Black-as-buffoon, Spottswood argued, they would balk when African Americans demanded the same rights and privileges as other citizens. But if children learned that “all men are fundamentally equal,” he added, then “the adult problems of segregation, employment and educational and housing differentials based on race will be resolved.” Hardly a sideshow to the civil-rights struggle, as liberal Whites claimed, text revision was a precondition for its success.\(^4\)

Below the Mason-Dixon line, ironically, Whites understood this relationship all too well. Indeed, southern segregationists condemned Commager and Morison’s *Growth of the American Republic*, the same book that called slaves “happy,” as too friendly to Blacks. The authors provided brief discussions of racial segregation and campaigns against it, causing many southern school districts to blacklist their book. Whereas Blacks fought mostly in vain to remove slurs from northern books, Whites successfully blocked any positive or sympathetic treatment of Blacks from southern ones. White supremacists clearly recognized the power of history to shape racial attitudes, even if White liberals did not.

**In the South: “Integrated Textbooks” and Massive Resistance**

In 1952, outraged Whites in Alabama discovered that a state civics text included a chapter entitled, “Minority Groups Should Share Equally With All Others in the American Way of Life.” Enumerating different forms of modern-day racial discrimination, the chapter also provided a brief description of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). News of the textbook soon reached the desk of Governor Gordon Persons, who deemed it an insult to “Southern tradition.” Ironically, the text’s authors had already taken steps to mollify these Dixie sensibilities; in its discussion

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of the FEPC, for example, the book stressed that "some authorities" believed that "you can't get rid of people's prejudices by passing a law." In the White South, however, any allusion to "prejudices" was one allusion too many. At Persons' urging, the state board of education announced that it would drop the textbook unless the entire chapter about minorities was deleted. The publisher happily complied, and the text was quickly readopted by the state of Alabama.23

The Alabama episode illustrated the central theme of southern textbook politics. To maintain their supremacy, Whites had to delete any mention of their misdeeds. Since the early twentieth century, to be sure, southerners had fought to remove so-called "anti-Confederate" accounts of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.24 In 1954, however, the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision accelerated the quest to purge such viewpoints from the texts. As always, history books provoked the sharpest controversy. A year after Brown, for example, one text critic told Georgia's Board of Education that its state history text—published, significantly, above the Mason-Dixon Line—presented a "Yankee" perspective upon slavery and segregation, stressing the evils of both systems and neglecting their "positive" features. "[N]orthern publishers should not be given the chance to lull southerners into a state of indifference through their version of life in the south," the critic warned.25

After history texts, books for teaching civics sparked the most outrage among White southerners. As in Alabama, critics blasted even the most tempered allusions to contemporary "social problems" between Blacks and Whites. But they also briddled at civics texts for undermining the biological basis of "race" itself. In Georgia, for example, Whites attacked a text that attributed races' different economic circumstances to "geographic situation" rather than to inherent characteristics. "The American Indian . . . had

23Aubrey Williams to Gordon Persons, 18 July 1952, frame 206; Southern Conference Educational Fund, "Should all discussion of racial and religious intolerance be suppressed in the school rooms of a Southern state?" (ms, n.d. [1952]), frame 207, both in reel 10, part 18C, NAACP Papers; Ruby Hurley to Persons, 27 May 1952; Persons to Herman Talmadge, n.d. [1952], both enclosed with Herman Talmadge to May Talmadge, 5 June 1952, folder 5, box 8, May Erwin Talmadge Papers, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. Established by executive order in 1941, the Fair Employment Practices Committee provided a frequent flashpoint for white-supremacist dissent in the years before Brown v. Board of Education. Although the FEPC had little practical effect upon workplace discrimination, it symbolized Yankee intrusion into Dixie's allegedly "natural" system of race relations. Dewey W. Grantham, The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 195-96; David R. Goldfield, Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 33-37.

24For brief accounts of these earlier textbook campaigns in the South, see Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 180-91; Zimmerman, Whose America?, 32-42.

25State Board of Education minutes, 12 Sept. 1955, p. 11, folder 5, box 33, Talmadge Papers.
not emerged far from the level of savagery when the White man arrived," one angry critic told state officials. If students came to believe that "social conditions are more important than heredity," he continued, they would eventually abandon any distinctions between racial groups. The result would be a "free and unhindered mixing of the races," he warned, eroding the White birthright of genetic superiority.28

Southerners also assailed music textbooks, highlighting significant regional differences in the postwar textbook controversy. Whereas northern Blacks condemned music books for reprinting slur-filled songs by Stephen Foster, for example, southern Whites often blasted the same books for removing the slurs from Foster’s songs. In 1955, Georgians attacked a music text that had altered Foster’s “Old Folks At Home” to read “0, brothers, how my heart grows weary” rather than “O, darkies, how my heart grows weary.” At first glance, one Georgia citizen conceded, “it may seem a little absurd to ban a whole songbook because one word in one song was changed.” Yet White southerners “understand the dangers of such things,” he quickly added, even if other Americans did not. “There is no place in Georgia schools any time for anything that disagrees with our way of life,” he concluded, quoting the chairman of the state school board. That board eventually approved the songbook but only on the condition that its publisher produce a special “Georgia edition” that included Foster’s “original words.”29

Meanwhile, White southern critics also attacked literature textbooks. Here, again, their complaints inverted the northern pattern; while northern Blacks charged that literature texts slurred African-Americans, southern Whites worried that the texts would bring the races closer together. Southerners especially bridled at so-called “integrated” children’s stories, starting with Jerold Beim’s “The Swimming Hole.” In the story, two groups of boys—one White, one Black—meet at a swimming hole, where they play happily together. But one White child refuses to swim with the Blacks. He eventually receives a painful sunburn, whereupon the other Whites reproach him. “Suppose we would refuse to play with you now because your face is red?” they ask the bigoted boy. The story sparked accolades across the North but outrage in the South, where several states banned it from the schools. “It is bad enough to have to fight against the Douglasses and the Javites and the Humphreys and the Cellers,” declared Georgia

28 "Our Changing Social Order" (ms, n.d. [1955]), enclosed with George C. Dean to May Talmadge, 22 April 1955, folder 8, box 8, Talmadge Papers.
segregationist Charles J. Bloch in 1959, condemning Beim’s story, “but to have to fight against the enemies in our own midst is worse.” Significantly, the politicians whom Bloch enumerated were all northern supporters of racial integration. Just as the South resisted “mixed” classrooms, he urged, so must it reject textbooks that promoted them.  

No children’s story was safe from racist southern censors. Alabama critics asked school officials to drop *The Rabbits’ Wedding*, which described the nuptials of a Black hare and a White one. The issue soon entered the state legislature, where at least one lawmaker demanded that the story be burned as well as removed from the schools. A second book by Jerold Beim— *Two is a Team*, describing a pair of Black and White playmates—earned the censure of Alabama’s Ku Klux Klan, which deemed the new story “a lot worse” than *The Rabbits’ Wedding*. As late as 1964, finally, White parents in Florida excoriated a new edition of *The Three Little Pigs* for portraying the black pig as “better” than the white one. Unlike northern liberals, in short, southern segregationists never doubted the influence of textbooks upon American racism. The White South would not stand idly by while its schoolbooks impugned White supremacy.

**Brown-ing the American Textbook: From History to Psychology**

In 1955, a Black advocate for “integrated” history celebrated the Supreme Court’s most historic ruling about race: *Brown v. Board of Education*. Handed down the previous year, *Brown* rejected state measures that had segregated Black schoolchildren from Whites. As the speaker warned, however, “real integration” required changed minds as well as changed laws. “Legal gains and favorable court decisions . . . cannot complete the work that must be done,” he declared, “The spirit of legal justice must permeate the undercurrents of community life.” Specifically, he stressed, children needed “accurate knowledge about ALL peoples, ALL races, and even ALL classes and branches of human society”—in other words, an understanding of history. Otherwise, White children would continue to despise Black ones—no matter where Blacks went to school.

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3Charles J. Bloch to James S. Peters, 4 March 1959; May Talmadge to Bloch, 5 March 1959, both in folder 12, box 30, Talmadge Papers.


5“Negro History in the Curriculum,” *Negro History Bulletin* (December 1955), fiche 003-565-2, SCF. The unidentified speaker delivered his address to the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, America’s oldest and most influential black history organization. Founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson, the ASNLH would
Yet the Brown decision itself focused only upon Black psyches, not upon White ones. Segregating Black children "generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone," the Supreme Court intoned. Here the Court cited new "psychological knowledge," starting with research by Harlem scholar Kenneth B. Clark. In a series of experiments conducted with his wife, Mamie, Clark demonstrated that Black children preferred White dolls and pictures to Black ones. Although the Clarks did not show that this bias was more pronounced among children in all-Black environments, the Court presumed a strong link between Blacks' alleged "inferiority complex" and their segregation in public schools. Nor did the justices take note of the Clarks' work on White personalities, which were also found to suffer injury from racial prejudice. In the Court's unanimous decision, the evil of segregation lay solely in its evil effect upon African Americans.\footnote{Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U.S. 483; Kluger, Simple Justice, 318-19, 353-56; Scott, Contempt and Pity, 229n; Herman, Romance of American Psychology, 183-84.}

Emphasizing legal separation of the races, Brown did not address issues of curriculum. But integrationists were quick to apply Brown's premises to textbooks, warning that "segregated" schoolbooks, like segregated schools, would harm minority children. "The individual Negro is inhibited in his thoughts, aspirations, and activities by his own mental concepts of himself and his racial group," wrote a Springfield, Massachusetts, guidance counselor in 1957. "[He] is unaware of a culture which can give him pride and self-respect; he knows only a civilization in which the contributions of his race . . . have been either discredited or forgotten." Springfield had been a pioneer in intergroup education, establishing system-wide "pro-tolerance" activities that were widely imitated across the nation in the 1940s. But the program failed to alter feelings of resentment and inferiority among the "average Negro," the counselor wrote, who "lacks that pride of ancestry which other minorities . . . find it necessary to retain." Schools needed to pick up the slack, lest African Americans sink further into anger and self-hatred.\footnote{Walter H. English, "Minority Group Attitudes of Negroes and Implications for Guidance," Journal of Negro Education 26 (Spring 1957): 99-100, 105. On the intergroup "Springfield Plan" and its influence in other cities, see Clarence I. Chatto and Alice L. Halligan, The Story of the Springfield Plan (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1945); Mordecai Grossman, "The Schools Fight Prejudice: An Appraisal of the Intercultural Education Movement," Commentary 1 (April 1946): 36.}

Significantly, this essay appeared in the Journal of Negro Education (JNE), a leading voice for Black civil rights since the 1930s. Before Brown, the JNE and other African-American periodicals had emphasized the change its name in 1972 to the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 14, 301.}
corrosive effect of racist texts upon children of every race. After Brown, however, Black activists began to emphasize the mental status of Black children. Flooding into northern school offices and classrooms, Black text critics linked their campaign to sit-in protests in the South. Just as demonstrations at lunch counters would free Black adults from oppressive laws, one New York protester explained, text revision would liberate "the mind and heart" of African-American children. "We regard ourselves as engaged in a fight for the Negro's most precious possession—for any man's most precious possession—his dignity," declared a Black activist in Detroit, condemning a textbook that portrayed "happy" slaves. So long as Blacks could not "see themselves" in their schoolbooks, a Los Angeles spokesman added, their psyches would remain in chains.

To these text critics, the mere removal of offensive material would not suffice. Borrowing another term from social psychology, activists insisted that Black children needed to "identify" with their textbooks. "What would you think if you were a child born and brought up anywhere in Harlem [with] textbooks which ignored your existence?" asked Amsterdam News commentator Gertrude Wilson. "You would begin to think that you didn't exist." Especially in elementary schools, all-White textbooks like the "Dick and Jane" series—a relic of the 1920s—still predominated. "Textbooks simply do not present a picture of America as it is today," fumed a Detroit critic. "They do not enable children to establish identity or to develop a measure of belief in themselves and their future." A 1962 cartoon in a New York teachers' journal vividly captured this new critique. It showed an African-American mother reading a textbook, labeled "The First Reader," to her young daughter, who asks plaintively, "Where Am I?" The cartoon's title provided a stark and simple answer: "Still Missing."

For an example of earlier attacks on racist textbooks in the JNE, targeting the effect of these texts on white as well as black readers, see Jack Abramowitz, "Common Distortions in Textbook Treatment of Slavery," Journal of Negro Education 18 (Winter 1949): 16-18; for similar attacks in other black publications, see "Mississippi Takes the Lead," Negro History Bulletin 2 (November 1938): 12; "Negro Textbooks in the Public Schools," Black Dispatch, 26 April 1939, frame 155, reel 63; "The Negro's Debut in Chicago Schools," Chicago Bee, 7 June 1942, frame 521, reel 78, both in Tuskegee Institute News Clipping File; "Just Give Her a Generation," Negro Digest 1 (October 1943): 3.

From the NAACP and the Urban League to the Congress of Racial Equality and the Black Panthers, nearly every leading African-American organization joined the push for textbooks that would promote Black “identity” in the 1960s.\(^3\) Across the ideological spectrum, moreover, all of them cited the psychological damage of bigoted texts upon Black psyches. “As long as the mind is enslaved the body can never be free,” Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in 1968, urging Blacks to reject history textbooks that had stunted their confidence and pride. “With a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, the Negro must boldly throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to himself and the world: ‘I am somebody. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history... I am Black and comely.’” The following year, after King’s murder, the Black Panthers invoked nearly identical language in their own attack upon racist texts. “\textit{We want education that teaches us our true history},” the Panthers underlined. “If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.” Whatever their differences, King and the Panthers both viewed history as a cause of Blacks’ old sense of inferiority; at the same time, they also saw it as a potential source for a new Black identity.\(^9\)

Meanwhile, taking note of the high school failure and dropout rates among Blacks, African Americans increasingly linked these problems to prejudiced history books. A 1968 cartoon by Black animator Brumsic Brandon showed a class full of beaming White children and one bored, listless Black boy. At the front of the classroom, the White teacher grinned as she read from a textbook: “Then the good cowboy, all dressed in white, beat up the bad guy, who was dressed in Black, put on his white hat, mounted his white stallion and rode off into the sunset.” The message was clear; because the curriculum ignored or denigrated Blacks, as another critic explained, they had little “motivation” to learn. “Anyone who is Black is taught... that Negroes are not a civilization or culture,” the prominent

\(^3\)The term “identity” was most closely associated with psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who used it to describe the necessary process whereby individuals linked themselves to human communities—in the past as well as in the present. A close student of Black literature and history, Erikson warned that African-Americans faced an especially difficult task in this regard: Blacks “are made to feel so inexorably ‘different,’” he wrote, “that legal desegregation can only be the beginning of a long and painful inner re-identification.” Erikson understood that Blacks across the political spectrum—not just in the “Black Power” movement—needed to construct a black identity, and that each individual would do so in his or her own way. Herman, \textit{Romance of American Psychology}, 292; Gitlin, \textit{Twilight of Common Dreams}, 127; Lawrence J. Friedman, \textit{Identity’s Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson} (New York: Scribner, 1999), 261.

Brown-ing the American Textbook

author James Baldwin told a 1968 Congressional hearing. “You cannot educate a child if you first destroy his morale.”

New York Representative James Scheuer, co-sponsor of a bill to create a national commission on Black history, had convened that hearing. He reflected the growing consensus among powerful White liberals who readily embraced the African-American critique of racist textbooks. Whereas an earlier generation of “interculturalists” had dismissed texts as irrelevant, White liberals in the post-Brown era chose to emphasize them. To Scheuer, indeed, nothing less than the War on Poverty—and the fate of its largely Black clientele—lay in the balance. “Until the American Negro student can have an enhanced image of himself and his heritage and historical background,” Scheuer declared, “our Negro fellow Americans will remain alienated, and our antipoverty, education, and job training programs will be measurably less effective.” A similar argument appeared in the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders, a landmark of 1960s race liberalism. Although the report blamed “White racism” for urban riots, it devoted most of its analysis to the ways in which public institutions—including school textbooks—supposedly scarred the Black psyche. “Designed to serve a middle-class culture, much educational material appears irrelevant to the youth of the racial and economic ghetto,” the Kerner Commission claimed. “Reduced motivation to learn results.”

But winning actual modifications in textbooks proved easier said than done, as this burgeoning interracial alliance would soon discover. The American textbook industry, a multibillion dollar behemoth with a built-in aversion to change, presented the biggest obstacle. Each new product required an enormous investment of capital, one close observer of the industry explained, “so that asking a text publisher to rewrite a history book is a little like asking General Motors to design a new car.” Publishers were especially wary of losing business in the South, where most textbook adoption occurred at the state level, and the cancellation of a single contract could cripple an entire firm. “When a publisher goes before an adoption committee in a southern state,” an industry representative revealed in 1965, “the first question he is asked is, ‘Are there any pictures of Negroes in these books of yours?’” Amid escalating complaints in the North, then, publishers frequently published two editions of their textbooks: an “integrated”

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version above the Mason-Dixon Line and an all-white (or "mint-julep")
volume below it. As late as 1967, the dual editions for one elementary-
school reader even sported different covers. The Northern cover displayed
two boys—one White, one Black—and a model of a ship; but the South-
ern volume airbrushed out the African American, leaving only the white
child and the ship.42

Widely reported in the press, the dual-edition phenomenon sparked
angry denunciations of the textbook industry across the urban North. By
tailoring their wares to southern racism, one educator wrote, publishers
sacrificed both "intellectual integrity and sound scholarship" on the altar
of "sectional interests." Other critics simply indicted publishers' worship
of Mammon. As one publisher of dual editions acknowledged, his compa-
ny aimed to "serve our existing customers"; in the book business, he gra-
tuitously added, "the customer chooses." To critics, however, textbooks
represented one realm where the customer—at least the racist customer—
should not be allowed to choose. In a 1965 address to a conference of pub-
lishers, Urban League Director Whitney Young urged them to print "what
people ought to know," not just what would sell. "Don't approach inte-
gration like castor oil," Young pleaded. "For once, look at something not
as a problem but as an opportunity. . . . Let's be honest and report history
as it happened."43

Yet as Young went on to admit, newly "integrated" texts in the North
could contain their own distortions. To appease White supremacists, racist
textbooks had denigrated or ignored African Americans; but to satisfy urban
Black constituencies, Young delicately warned, revised texts sometimes gave
Blacks "too much credit for originality." The founder of civil disobedience
in the United States was not contemporary Black activist James Farmer, as
one text implied, but rather Boston Tea Party sparkplug Samuel Adams,
Young noted. Nor had civil rights workers pioneered the "sit-in" form of
protest, which had been used by striking labor unions many years earlier.
Theoretically, no necessary contradiction existed between therapy and accu-

42Dorothy Sterling, untitled speech (ms, 26 July 1967), pp. 11-12, fiche 003.560-5,
SCF; Helen Bailey, unpublished statement (ms, 1 March 1963), folder 16, box 12, Logan
Papers; Hillel Black, The American Schoolbook (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 119; Nation-
al Urban League, Textbooks, Civil Rights, and the Education of the American Negro (n.p., 1965),
43Aaron N. Slotkin, "The Treatment of Minorities in Textbooks: The Issues and The
Outlook," Strengthening Democracy 41 (May 1964): 2, folder 22, box 39, Philadelphia Fellow-
ship Commission Papers, Urban Archives, Temple University; Black, American Schoolbook,
119; National Urban League, Textbooks, Civil Rights, and the Education of the American Negro,
p. 2.
imposed its own form of bias, as social studies teacher and future historian Larry Cuban wrote presciently in 1967: “Selecting materials that will have youngsters think well of themselves . . . implies a manipulative use of historical sources to obtain a so-called desirable end. Such a maneuver borders on propagandizing and leaves oneself open to the charge of using precisely the same methods employed by bigots.”

Inspired by Black protest, meanwhile, other racial minorities began to demand textbooks that provided “all students” with “images and identification,” as a Chicano/a spokesman in California wrote. Texts that excluded Chicanos “generate in [their] minds feelings of inferiority and tend to make them ashamed,” another activist added, closely echoing the rhetoric of Brown v. Board of Education. To a team of Latino/a and Asian critics, meanwhile, textbooks’ new attention to African Americans reinforced the “generalized U.S. stereotype” that “only the Black man suffered from prejudice.” Across the country, publishers dutifully inserted new material about Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. Yet here too, self-esteem and group pride trumped historical truth. Lest Hispanics take offense, for example, texts shortened or removed their accounts of Indian massacres by the Spanish conquistadors. Nor did most texts make mention of African involvement in the slave trade, which might alienate Black constituencies. “The principle that lies behind textbook history is that the inclusion of nasty information constitutes bias even if the information is true,” surmised Frances Fitzgerald, in a 1979 essay focused largely upon textbooks from the 1960s.

Finally, even Whites adopted this new psychological rhetoric as a weapon against textbook revision. Especially in history texts, Whites warned, too much material about slavery, segregation, or Indian genocide would harm their own children’s mental health. “Psychiatrists say it is important for children not to feel guilt for things that are not their fault,” declared one California parent, condemning a new text that was coauthored by the Black historian John Hope Franklin. When White children encountered the book, another parent feared, they would “be made to feel guilty over the past over which they had no control, and about which they knew nothing.” Indeed, a third critic added, Franklin’s text was sure to provoke a “guilt complex” within brittle White egos. “Education is getting a positive self-image about oneself,” complained a White parent in Michigan, blasting a

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textbook that described White attacks upon Blacks during the Chicago Race Riot of 1919. "No child, White or Black, will get a positive image by reading about stabbings, war, the problems."46

Once psychological health had been enshrined as a central goal of American history instruction, in short, it became difficult, or even impossible, to address a central theme of that same history—racism. To be sure, many Blacks continued to stress the effect of bigoted textbooks upon White prejudice. In the same breath as he blasted textbooks for fueling Blacks’ "sense of worthlessness," Martin Luther King, Jr. also said that the texts would "augment the anachronistic doctrine of White supremacy."47 But the new emphasis upon self-esteem prevented the textbooks themselves from examining racism, a subject that could only injure the feelings of its perpetuators as well as its victims. By the 1970s, Frances Fitzgerald observed, texts depicted Blacks "struggling for rights"—but rarely noted "what these guys are struggling against."48 Lest any American group suffer a slight to its psyche, American textbooks would celebrate all of them.

Conclusion: The Textbook Revolution and Identity Politics

In July of 1968, a publishing spokesman declared that America had entered its "second textbook revolution." The first one occurred after the 1957 launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite, which sparked a "thoroughgoing revision" of science textbooks. The other revolution surrounded the treatment of African Americans, especially in history books. Starting with Brown v. Board of Education and picking up steam in the 1960s, the campaign for "integrated" texts had produced "a whole host of new or revised textbooks which give us a better picture of the Negro's role in our country," the spokesman boasted.49

He was right. Textbooks underwent an enormous transformation in the 1960s, first in the North and then, more remarkably, in the South.

49 J. Anthony Lukas, "Educators Turn to a Balanced Teaching of Negroes' Role in American History," New York Times, 8 July 1968, fiche 003.560-6, SCF.
Three decades later, it is easy to forget the insults that racial minorities suffered from previous textbooks; the resistance that they met when they sought to change the books; and the radical improvements that their efforts wrought. As early as 1962, a new edition of Commager and Morison’s text replaced their notorious “Sambo” passage with material about slave rebellions; by 1970, one reviewer surmised, most schoolbooks presented “a dramatically different set of facts” about slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement itself. A 1964 edition of Henry W. Bragdon’s History of a Free People declared that slaves “were seldom cruelly treated”; just three years later, a new edition of the book said slaves “were treated like cattle.” Other texts added information about a host of African-American luminaries, ranging from Denmark Veysey and Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X. By 1967, the Wall Street Journal would report that northern textbook buyers were “carefully checking indexes” to see how new products addressed, or ignored, the experience of Blacks and other minorities.22

In the North, ironically, the rise of “integrated” textbooks reflected the decline of integrated schools. Whites abandoned public schools for private schools or the suburbs, creating a host of Black-majority urban school districts and a powerful market for new history books. Thanks to strong federal oversight, meanwhile, southern schools would soon become more integrated than their northern counterparts; by 1970, indeed, one-third of Black children in the South would attend a majority-White school. Textbooks integrated as well, sprinkling their pages with pictures and praise of famous African Americans. As in the North, though, the revised books followed the iron law of American textbook politics—offend no one. Despite new passages about Black freedom fighters, for example, southern texts still exalted Robert E. Lee and the Confederate struggle against “invading” Yankees. Just as Blacks needed celebratory history to heal the wounds of racism, whites argued, so did Dixie’s sons and daughters require psychic compensation for their “Lost Cause” in the Civil War. “For God’s sake,” railed a White southern school official in 1970, “give us some history to be proud of.”23

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The final comment provides a convenient epigram for America's post-war textbook revolution, which reflected an even broader revolution in political culture. Swayed by the burgeoning discipline of psychology, more and more Americans defined public problems in terms of individual mental health. In the realm of race, psychologists initially focused on the diseased, irrational minds of "prejudiced" Whites. But Brown v. Board of Education helped shift attention to the psyches of African Americans, who demanded textbooks that would relieve their sense of inferiority and would protect their nascent identity. Hardly a creature of modern-day multiculturalism, as many accounts would imply, "identity politics" was rooted in civil rights-era liberalism itself. Prefiguring many multiculturalists today, textbook activists defined their politics along racial or ethnic lines in order to make each individual feel fixed, grounded, and proud.

As historian Ellen Herman has reminded us, such psychological approaches could be "politically enriching and liberating," especially for women and racial minorities. But they could also become politically impoverished and constractive, blinding Americans to the very racism that had spawned identity politics in the first place. If every individual retained the right to a "positive image," after all, no text could introduce a negative truth about anyone—including White people. When Blacks won new material about their triumphal deeds, moreover, they cleared the way for other groups to do the same. So textbooks billowed to 700 or even 800 pages, giving every group "some history to be proud of" but diverting them from the painful history they shared.

Nor was it clear that "positive" history actually improved minorities' pride—or, especially, minorities' academic performance in schools. By 1968, indeed, America's most prominent Black psychologist would question whether history could affect the Black psyche at all. "You cannot give pride to an adolescent who is four or five years retarded in reading and

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52 According to historian Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, for example, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a "shift from civil rights universalism to the Black identity movement." In workplaces as well as schools, she argues, "The [Black] therapeutic movement, with this ethos of empowerment, has trumped the civil rights movement, with its vision of the just society." Likewise, Todd Gitlin chronicles "the swerve from civil rights, emphasizing a universal condition and universalizable rights, to cultural separatism, emphasizing difference and distinct needs." Both authors date this development to the Black Power movement of the late 1960s, which opened the way for a profusion of identity-based challenges to the civil rights ideal. As the textbook debate shows, however, "identity politics" lay firmly inside the mainstream of 1960s liberalism—not just on its radical fringes. Lasch-Quinn, Race Experts, xii, 159; Gitlin, Twilight of Common Dreams, 153, 128-34.


54 Herman, Romance of American Psychology, 312.

55 For further explanation and evidence of this point, see Zimmerman, Whose America?, esp. 6-7, 214, 221-22.
understanding and using English by trying to teach him . . . racial heritage or racial identification,” warned Kenneth B. Clark, in a meeting with Robert F. Kennedy and several other leading White liberals. “Pride comes from the ability of the individual to deal with the demands of his environment competently and competitively.” As chief academic architect of Brown, Clark still maintained that segregation and discrimination had damaged Blacks’ mental health. But a lasting cure for the disease would require true racial integration and equality, not simply a new set of reading materials. No matter how many pages or peoples they added, it seemed, American history textbooks could never bear the historic burden that Americans placed upon them.