

Dismantling Lost Cause Fables: A Content Analysis Examining Narrative and Visual Representations of Slavery in U.S. History Textbooks

Courtenay Lonquist Forward, *Baylor University*, courtenayforward@gmail.com

Mentor: Sarah M. Straub, *Stephen F. Austin State University*, straubsm@sfasu.edu

Abstract

Lost Cause revisionism obscures racialized chattel slavery's foundational position in antebellum society and its significance as the cause of the American Civil War. Misperceptions about enslavement and the social construction of race abound in modern classrooms due to vague coverage and Eurocentric perspectives in U.S. history textbooks. Thus, slavery is simultaneously decontextualized and normalized in narrative descriptions and visual imagery. Lost Cause fables embedded in the explicit curricula persuaded generations of students that slavery was an economic inevitability legally and politically sanctioned in the British colonies of North America and the United States of America. This content analysis study examined visual imagery and narrative descriptions of enslavement in six primary- and secondary-level U.S. history textbooks. Textbook inclusion criteria drew from national and state-adopted texts to assess horizontal and vertical alignment across U.S. history curricula. Critical race theory informed the data collection and analysis procedures focusing on the centrality and social construction of race, particularly relating to racialized enslavement in British North America. The analysis centered on textbook representations of racialized slavery and developmentally-appropriate lessons about America's racial, social, and gender hierarchies. The findings indicated that current U.S. history textbooks reproduce nineteenth-century Lost Cause ideology by justifying enslavement and normalizing Whiteness. Narrative descriptions of enslavement used sanitized language echoing Lost Cause fables about fair treatment and benevolent patriarchal enslavers. Visual representations illustrated antebellum contrasts from moonlight and magnolia imagery of plantation homes and heroic portraits of Confederate generals to distressing images of lash-scarred backs of enslaved people and Ku Klux Klan members threatening Black families in their homes. The findings illustrated the defense of antebellum culture and the Confederacy, which have considerable consequences for 21st-century society. The study's findings have implications for key decision-makers regarding the current and future framing of race-based chattel slavery in U.S. history textbooks and explicit social studies curricula.

Key Words

Civil War, critical race theory, Lost Cause ideology, race, slavery, U. S. history textbooks, United Daughters of the Confederacy, White supremacy

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Current primary- and secondary-level social studies textbooks often use visual imagery and narrative descriptions about slavery, the Confederacy, and the Civil War laden with Lost Cause ideology and White hegemony (Bailey, 1991; Bohan et al., 2019; Brosnan, 2016; Cox, 2003; McRae, 2018; Zimmerman, 2004). Lost Cause refers to the veneration of the Confederacy popularized by pro-Confederate journalist Edward A. Pollard immediately after the Civil War (Wilson, 1980). Current literature describes how representations of enslavement and the social construction of race in social studies textbooks impact students' understanding of race and racism (Brazelton, 2021; Brown & Brown, 2015; Woyshner, 2006; Woyshner & Schocker, 2015; Zimmerman, 2004). Misperceptions about slavery and race persist in modern classrooms due to Eurocentric perspectives and opaque treatment of enslavement in U.S. history textbooks. This research brief examines the connection between racialized slavery and White hegemony, and advocates for dismantling Lost Cause fables because of the impact on generations of students and educators.

Southern elites invented Lost Cause dogma in the postbellum era to influence historical interpretations of antebellum society and the Civil War (Cox, 2003; Dombey, 2020). Bailey's (1991) seminal study on Lost Cause ideology identified three critical elements. First, slavery was a benign and paternalistic institution that improved the enslaved. Second, Confederates fought to defend themselves against Northern aggression. Third, Reconstruction ultimately failed due to carpet-bagging Yankee malice, fraudulent Black rule, and White Southern traitors. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Northern publishers appeased Southern Lost Cause interests with so-called "mint julep textbooks" (Black, 1967, p. 119). Mint julep texts soothed the bitterness of the

Confederate defeat just like the beverage eased the discomfort of a sweltering Southern day (Bohan et al., 2019).

Lost Cause advocates emphasized states' rights rather than slavery as the cause of the war, transforming treason and secession into patriotism (Dombey, 2020). Mildred Lewis Rutherford, the official historian of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, funneled Lost Cause revisionism into the Daughters' education campaign. This study builds on existing literature about the enduring impact of Rutherford's *A Measuring Rod to Test Textbooks* pamphlet (Bailey, 1994; Case, 2009; Cobb, 2016; Rohrer, 2019). The Daughters' textbook crusade recalibrated slavery's role in plantation culture according to Lost Cause dogma (Cox, 2021). While Lost Cause ideology has largely fallen out of favor in academia, the same cannot be said for the general public (Boyce, 2018; Cox, 2021; Foner, 2005). Confirmation bias, the validation of one's existing beliefs, is crucial to the longevity of Lost Cause ideology and the White racial frame in Texas and nationwide (Ormrod, 2020; Feagin, 2013).

Problem Statement

There are extensive implications to ignoring the problem of history textbooks reflecting Lost Cause ideology and Eurocentric framing for visual and narrative depictions of racialized slavery (Bickford & Clabough, 2021). Educators unknowingly replicate educative-psychic violence through role-play, simulations, and board games (King & Woodson, 2016/2017). Educators present resistance stories that confuse students about why all enslaved people did not fight or flee (Baptist, 2014; Oliver, 2016). Baptist (2014) explained that "many African American students struggle with a sense of shame that most of their ancestors could not escape" (p. xxii). Classroom

lessons shrouding the history of slavery in America obscure the historical context of contemporary systemic racism (Brazelton, 2021). In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance Project reported that only 8% of 1,000 high school seniors surveyed chose slavery as the reason Southern states seceded from the Union (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2018). Persistent misperceptions about racialized slavery and the mainstreaming of White grievance rhetoric led to a steady rise in racially motivated hate crimes in the U.S. in recent years (Brockell, 2022; FBI National Press Office, 2023; Pettit, 2019; Strother, 2021). Empirical data and increasing hate illustrate the need to demystify slavery and its afterlife for students and educators (Hartman, 1997; SPLC, 2018).

This study is critical because social studies and history curricula are on center stage as far right-wing politicians and conservative-leaning parents fight against teaching about race and racism in schools (Boyce, 2018; Cox, 2021; Fortin, 2021). In the postbellum era, slavery was a taboo subject, and today, racism is increasingly taboo (Blight, 1993; Hixenbaugh & Hylton, 2021). In 2020, following nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd, and several other unarmed Black people, the term critical race theory (CRT) burst onto the political scene (Fortin, 2021). Conservative media and politicians joined the anti-CRT movement after conservative scholar Christopher Rufo called the theory “cult indoctrination” on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show (Dorman, 2020; The Heritage Foundation, 2020). CRT is a graduate-level theoretical framework that is not taught in K–12 schools or undergraduate programs (Fortin, 2021). However, in 2021 Texas Senate Bill (SB) 3 banned teaching critical race theory and the 1619 Project. The same Senate Bill removed the requirement to teach the history of White supremacy, including slavery, eugenics, and the Ku Klux Klan (Texas Legislature Online, 2021). Far right-wing politicians are working to shroud America’s history of systemic injustice like the United Daughters of the Confederacy did in the previous century (Cox, 2021; McRae, 2018).

Objectives

This research brief summarizes a qualitative content analysis study that examined Lost Cause revisionism in the narrative descriptions and visual representations of slavery in U.S. history textbooks. Students construct cultural and racial identities in K–12 classrooms, so knowledge about enslavement and its legacy can lead to social and racial justice. Challenging Lost Cause ideology and unveiling the connection between slavery and White supremacy will impact generations. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do narrative descriptions of slavery in primary- and secondary-level U.S. history textbooks reflect racist Lost Cause ideology?
2. How does visual imagery of slavery in primary- and secondary-level U.S. history textbooks reflect racist Lost Cause ideology?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis design to evaluate six textbooks’ narrative and visual representations of chattel slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Textbook content analysis is a portal into the social construction of knowledge (Banks, 2020; Chu, 2017). I selected national, California, and Texas editions of fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade textbooks using inclusion criteria to assess horizontal and vertical alignment across U.S. history curricula (see Table). I organized the texts into two embedded units of analysis using geographic and grade-level criteria, and focused on common themes that transcend the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Critical race theory (CRT) aligned best with the transformative purpose of this study. I applied two tenets of CRT to collect and analyze data, including the centrality of race and racism and the social construction of race (Bell, 1992; Cabrera, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Matsuda, 2002; Solórzano, 1997). CRT’s application as a theoretical framework validates a fresh analysis of Lost Cause historical framing to examine whether 19th-century revisionism

about slavery continues to resonate in modern textbooks.

Data collection and analysis were iterative and intentional processes. I systematically reviewed the textbook chapters, titles, indexes, narrative descriptions, and visual imagery, considering a priori CRT tenets. I noted and memoed about recurring codes. During the first coding cycle, I identified 46 initial codes. I drew connections between the codes during the second coding cycle, identifying eight categories directly linked to my two research questions. I noted convergences and divergences in the textbooks. I streamlined the codes and categories into two emergent themes. Saldaña (2009) stated that the coder's primary goal is to find repetitive patterns

within the data to establish larger patterns or themes. I analyzed the language used in the texts to evaluate bias or partiality towards a racist ideology or Lost Cause explanations of slavery, the Civil War, and the Confederacy. Then I made inferences about the culture by examining the silences and exploring the null and hidden curriculum textbooks and the images (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I did not use all the data collected for this study and reconciled myself to discarding data to maintain focus on the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wolcott, 1994). I analyzed and compiled the central findings and meaningfully reconstructed the data in the research findings (Creswell & Creswell Báez, 2021).

Table

Case Sampling Criteria by Grade Level

Title	Grade Level	Publication Year	Publisher	Edition
<i>My World Social Studies: Building Our Nation</i>	5th	2016	Pearson	Texas
<i>U.S. History: Making a New Nation</i>	5th	2020	McGraw-Hill	National <i>Teacher's Edition</i>
<i>U.S. History: Early Colonial Period through Reconstruction</i>	8th	2016	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	Texas
<i>U.S. History & Geography: Growth & Conflict</i>	8th	2019	McGraw-Hill	California <i>Teacher's Edition</i>
<i>The Americans: United States History Since 1877</i>	11th	2016	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	Texas <i>Teacher's Edition</i>
<i>U.S. History & Geography</i>	11th	2016	McGraw-Hill	National

Summary of Key Findings

Two themes emerged during data collection and analysis. The first theme is slavery justified, and the second theme is defending antebellum Southern culture and the Confederacy. Based on the first research question, the six textbooks presented 1,017

references to the first theme. Narratives about enslavement normalized Eurocentric perspectives, used nuanced language, and echoed Lost Cause fables about idyllic plantations, kind enslavers, and fair treatment. The texts bolstered the happy slave narrative by celebrating a new American culture

developed by enslaved people blending African and European customs. The texts presented 1,172 references to the second theme. The inclusion of Confederate women's first-person narratives normalized and justified their antebellum privilege and the elevated status of Whiteness (Harris, 1995). The textbooks framed Reconstruction as a failure, with five of the six texts using the offensive names that White Southern Democrats applied to White Southern Republicans (scalawags) and White Northern Republicans (carpetbaggers). The textbooks reflect Lost Cause revisionism by rationalizing Eurocentric perspectives and reproducing economic, geographic, and political justifications for racialized enslavement.

An example of textbook framing of Reconstruction illustrates the normalization of Eurocentric perspectives. *U.S. History & Geography* (2016), the 11th-grade national textbook analyzed in this study, opened Chapter 10, Reconstruction, with the following essential question, "Was Reconstruction a success or a failure?" (p. 281). Reconstruction was a brief period of radical racial justice, increased political participation, and expanded access to education for formerly enslaved people. *U.S. History & Geography* (2016) explained that Radical Reconstruction "changed Southern politics by bringing hundreds of thousands of African Americans into the political process ... [and] angered many white Southerners, who responded by fighting back against the federal government's policies" (p. 289). The textbook described Reconstruction with deficit framing and justified White Southerners' fight to restore White supremacy at the local, state, and national levels as soon as they were allowed to return to Washington, D.C. *U.S. History & Geography* (2016) embraced pro-Confederate perspectives by referring to scalawags and carpetbaggers. Hundreds of examples of the two themes, slavery justified and defending antebellum Southern culture, exist in the six textbooks analyzed in this study.

Based on the second research question, visual representations illustrated the extremes of life in antebellum America. Paintings, photographs, and

illustrations demonstrated lavish antebellum culture, the economic benefits of America's slaveocracy, slavery's violence, and the redemption of White supremacy. Nostalgic moonlight and magnolia imagery included plantation homes, heroic portraits of Confederates, and enslaved people dancing and making music. Confronting imagery of the whip-scarred backs of formerly enslaved people and Klan members menacing Black families through kitchen windows desensitizes or traumatizes students and educators. Visual representations of slavery simultaneously reinforce Lost Cause fables and normalize White hegemony.

Race was ubiquitous in all six textbooks, but only one text defined race for its readers. None of the texts addressed the legal and social construction of race, a core tenet of critical race theory. Carefully curated visuals and narratives normalized Whiteness and Eurocentrism. The texts presented the development of racialized slavery with cautious apathy and decontextualized the legacy of segregation and racism. Race was vital to the descriptions of enslaved peoples' resiliency, evolving culture, and embrace of Christianity.

Discussion

Slavery justified was the first theme that emerged from the research and converged with existing Lost Cause literature. The rise of the Cotton Kingdom intensified economic and geographic justifications for slavery. After Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, complicity between regional economies was so strong that abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner famously called regional leaders the "lords of the lash and lords of the loom" (Farrow et al., 2005, p. 37). The textbooks chronicled decades of political compromises and rising political violence over slavery that erupted into a full-blown Civil War. The textbook narratives emphasized political compromises and the economic viability of enslavement but downplayed economic complicity between Northern merchants and Southern planters.

Defending antebellum Southern culture and the Confederacy was the second emergent theme in the research findings. All six textbooks in this study represent modern mint julep texts because they modulated and sanitized slavery according to nineteenth-century Lost Cause ideology (Black, 1967; Bohan et al., 2019). Three critical elements of Lost Cause ideology exist in the texts; slavery was a paternalistic institution, Northern aggression caused the Civil War, and Radical Reconstruction failed (Bailey, 1991). First, the textbooks acknowledged that slavery was harsh but emphasized the development of Black culture. Narrative and visual representations elevated the unique musical and religious traditions developed by enslaved people. Second, Northern aggression and Southern victimization were recurring motifs. The narratives frame abolitionism as a threat to the Southern way of life, which is coded Eurocentrism that reflects the perspective of the enslaver rather than the enslaved. Third, the textbooks present Reconstruction's failure and White supremacy's resurgence as inevitable through the inclusion of visual representations of trauma and violence. Lost Cause ideology echoes through all six textbooks through the justifications of slavery, defense of antebellum culture, and the normalization of Whiteness.

This content analysis study applied two tenets of critical race theory to examine how Lost Cause revisionism impacts representations of slavery and its aftermath in U.S. history textbooks. The application of critical race theory as a theoretical framework validated innovative analysis of Lost Cause historical framing in modern textbooks. Dixson and Rousseau Anderson (2017) explained that educators interested in educational equity can use critical race theory to research the "persistent racial inequity in education" (p. 46). Examinations of first-person narratives were a particularly enlightening element of this research study. The incorporation of narratives by Confederate women normalized and justified their antebellum privilege, experiences, and the normalization of Whiteness (Harris, 1995). Analyzing the research

findings through a critical race theory lens complemented the work of educational scholars by centering race in U.S. history education.

Implications and Recommendations

The study's findings reveal the enduring legacy of the United Daughters of the Confederacy's campaign to control the historical narrative and inject Lost Cause fables into history textbooks. The findings illustrated justifications of slavery employed by textbooks, the defense of antebellum culture, and the normalization of Whiteness. This study's six national and state-adopted U.S. history textbooks epitomize modern mint julep texts because they shroud slavery according to Lost Cause ideology. The study's findings have implications for four groups of decision-makers: social studies educators, district-level administrators, textbook publishers, and state boards of education.

The study's findings have implications for social studies educators in Texas and nationwide. Educators play a pivotal role as moderators tasked with regulating the scope of social studies curricula and challenging the status quo of the master script and the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013; King, 2014; Schwartz, 1992; Thornton, 1991). Social studies classrooms are the prime location for critical inquiry into historical and modern matters of race and racism (Nelson & Pang, 2014). However, social studies education textbooks present race in problematic ways and many certified social studies educators do not have enough social studies background to meet the demands they face (Nelson & Pang, 2014; Thornton, 2001). All educators, particularly social studies teachers, benefit from understanding how the current framing of slavery perpetuates and normalizes White hegemony. In the current political climate, educators face an ethical dilemma about how to teach matters of race and racism or risk retaliatory measures from students, parents, and administrators. To date, 42 states have passed bills to "limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 1). New state laws impose fines on

educators who teach students to feel guilty about their racial identity (Pitzi, 2021). Limiting speech and looming financial penalties foster suspicion and cynicism in academic settings. Educators face the ethical dilemma of challenging the status quo of Lost Cause revisionism and White hegemony.

Administrators, textbook publishers, and state boards of education play critical roles in supporting students and educators. Administrators can support their learning communities by challenging Eurocentric perspectives, the White racial frame, and justifications for slavery. Publishers can update textbooks, and state boards of education can revise learning standards by removing the Lost Cause framing of enslavement and implicit Eurocentric language. This study has transformative implications for community-engaged scholarship in multicultural education.

Conclusion

Lost Cause revisionist history conceals racialized slavery's foundational role in antebellum society and its significance to the Civil War. Eurocentric perspectives in U.S. history textbooks lead to misperceptions about enslavement and race in K–12 classrooms. Narratives and visuals in U.S. history textbooks decontextualize slavery from its legacy of Jim Crow segregation and racism. Lost Cause fables in history textbooks convince successive generations of American students of the necessity of slavery and the inevitability of White hegemony. The study showed how textbooks rationalized Southern antebellum culture and defended the Confederacy. The textbooks portray Reconstruction's demise and the resurgence of White supremacy and segregation as unavoidable. The study has significant implications for decision-makers concerning future narrative and visual representations of racialized slavery and its aftermath in U.S. history textbooks. Challenging the status quo of White hegemony in textbooks has broad implications for students' social, cultural, and racial identities in the United States.

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