



# MADISON LACKEY

## THE EXISTENCE OF RACISM IN HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY CLASSES

### **Introduction**

In all four years I went to high school, I only had one history class that discussed black history. The textbook talked about the Civil Rights Movement, but did not talk about any other achievements of black people. I did not learn much else about black people for the remainder of my time in high school with the exception of Black History Month. During Black History Month, we usually spent a day or two learning the same basic facts about people, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, who have been taught to us since elementary school. This experience is not uncommon. Many schools use textbooks and curriculum that fail to give students a full representation of black history. Due to the fact that schools and textbooks do not effectively address black history, students will not be fully equipped to address issues of racism once they graduate; furthermore, textbooks contribute to ideas of racial inequalities. High school United States (US) History textbooks perpetuate racial stereotypes, create a black-versus-white mentality, and limit the scope of black history. These problems are caused by America's past issues with racism and need to be fixed by adopting a multicultural approach to the study of history and improving Black History Month.

### **Perpetuating Stereotypes**

Current textbooks use wording that perpetuates negative racial stereotypes. An example of this is the textbook *Nation of Nations*, which is used at a school in Johnson County, Kansas and is published by McGraw Hill, a popular textbook publisher (Davidson). In

the section discussing the sit-in movement, Davidson writes the following sentence: “Angry black students launched massive sit-ins at variety stores in Raleigh” (985–986). This sentence makes it seem as if the black students were trying to be violent and aggressive; however, for the most part the protests were peaceful (Morello). The violence that did occur during the sit-ins was mostly caused by white people who were attacking the black protesters (Morello). At the original sit-in that happened in Greensboro, North Carolina, four students sat quietly at a whites-only counter and refused to move. The police were called but were unable to do anything because no law had been broken (Morello). Even though the sit-ins were intended to be peaceful, *Nation of Nations* does not portray them this way. One stereotype that persists today is that black people are angry and violent. By depicting black students that participated in sit-ins as “angry,” the *Nation of Nations* textbook encourages this stereotype.

Textbooks also sustain the stereotype that black people are not smart. Although most current textbooks do incorporate some black history, they typically only focus on slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. For example, the Kansas Standards for History, Government, and Social Studies only require high school students to learn about reconstruction after the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement; slavery is not even covered. By limiting black history to the Civil Rights Movement, textbooks neglect to discuss many of the contributions that black people have made to science, art, medicine, music, and math. In high school US history classes, Kansas standards only require textbooks to recognize ten black people that did something other than help with the Civil Rights Movement (“Kansas Standards for History”). This makes it seem as if the only significant contributions that black people have made were to advocate for their civil rights.

In addition, these standards teach students that black people are not capable of making other significant contributions to society. Students in Kansas are not required to learn much about other contributions that black people have made (“Kansas Standards for History”). There have been many important black

inventors and politicians that are not discussed in textbooks. Because of the lack of representation of black history in textbooks, black students do not have many black role models to look up to. In history books, students are taught about politicians, inventors, writers, and artists that are white. There are important politicians, inventors, writers, and artists that were black but very few of them are mentioned in high school history textbooks and curriculum. Daniel Hale Williams was a black doctor and one of the first people to successfully perform open heart surgery (Gordon 106). Hiram Revels was the first black man to serve as a senator (Primus 1681). Mae C. Jemison was the first black woman to go to space (Cowens 38). Unfortunately, the standards in Kansas do not require schools to discuss these people. This could give students the impression that black people are not smart enough to accomplish the same things that white people have accomplished.

This stereotype that black people are unintelligent can have negative effects. Because curriculum portrays black students as inferior and unsuccessful, many black students give up on their education early (Zimmerman 48). These students don't try because they believe that they are going to fail no matter what. It also causes black students to struggle with their self-esteem and racial identity. Through studying American history in high school, white students are easily able to understand their racial identity. On the other hand, high school history only focuses on the civil rights aspect of black history. It is difficult for black students to learn about and understand their racial identity from one historical event. As a result, black students feel inferior because school curriculum and textbooks focus on white people (Zimmerman 48).

### **Black-Versus-White Mentality**

Textbooks discuss slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in a way that makes white people and black people seem like enemies. Many textbooks make it seem like the only people that were civil rights leaders were black. Not only does this ignore the civil rights efforts of other groups, but it also over simplifies the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was not simply a black-versus-white conflict; however, history textbooks portray

it in that way. A study was done by Ashly Woodson in which she interviewed urban high school students about the representation of black history in textbooks (Woodson 57). When asked to name ten civil rights leaders, the students came up with this list: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Maya Angelou, Thurgood Marshall, Nelson Mandela, Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth (Woodson 60). The researcher then asked what these people have in common and this exchange followed:

Monica: They're all Black

Researcher: They are all Black, you named all Black people.

Jasen: But you said civil rights leaders.

Researcher: Are all civil rights leaders Black?

Xavier: What else would they be? (Woodson 61)

Another student stated that “the textbook is what you supposed to know, so basically, if it’s just us against white people in there, then that’s what history will be to me...” (Woodson 62). It is clear that these students’ textbooks caused them to think that the Civil Rights Movement was simply a conflict between blacks and whites; but, it was more complicated than that. There were white people that helped with the Civil Rights Movement and slavery and this is important to note. Juliette Hampton Morgan was a white woman who lived in Montgomery, Alabama. She wrote several letters opposing segregation. One of her letters, which praised the Montgomery bus boycott, was published in the *Montgomery Advertiser* (Salmond 235). In the state of Kansas, the only white people who are required to be discussed in relation to the Civil Rights Movement are George Wallace and Orval Faubus (“Kansas Standards for History”). George Wallace was the governor of Alabama who was strongly opposed to the Civil Rights Movement and actively tried to stop the efforts of civil rights activists (Bernier). Orval Faubus was the governor of Arkansas who attempted to circumvent the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by preventing the integration of the first school in Little Rock (Reed 167). This gives the impression that white authorities aim to work against black people who are fighting for equal rights. Such a mindset is

problematic considering that black students will feel like they need to be in conflict with white people and white authorities in order to overcome racism. This is especially troublesome with today's violent conflicts between black people and the police. Textbooks should give the impression that black people and white people should work together in order to end issues of racial injustice.

### **Restricting and Limiting Black History**

One of the main ways schools restrict the teaching of black history is through Black History Month. This limits discussion about the contributions of black people to one month. Black History Month does allow students to get some exposure to black history, but it has unfortunately become a yearly ritual that is often treated as a burden. Furthermore, the Black History Month curriculum, as it is taught today, is largely ineffective. Black History Month was created to promote the celebration of the contributions of black people, but current Black History Month curriculum perpetuates the idea that whites are superior (King & Brown 24). Limiting the study of black history to one month makes it seem unimportant. Students spend most of their time learning about the contributions of white people and a short amount of time learning about black people. In addition, Black History Month has become routine and ritualistic. Many teachers see it as a burden or just another thing that they have to check off their list. Students often hear about the same events and people each year; no new material is presented (King & Brown 25). Black History Month could be an effective tool; however, the way it is currently taught only encourages ideas of racial inferiority.

Another way textbooks limit the teaching of black history is by treating racism like an issue of the past. Textbooks create the impression that racism ended after the Civil Rights Movement. There is so much focus on the achievements that happened during the civil rights era that students do not realize that racial injustice is still an issue. It is important to recognize the progress that has been made, but it is also important to realize that racism still exists today in our society. Textbooks acknowledge that slavery was wrong, but they do not acknowledge the fact that racism still exists

(Hughes 203). If students believe that racism is over, they will have trouble seeing the racism that still exists today. As a result, they will become complacent and neglect to try and fix current racial injustices.

### **Reasons that Black History is not Adequately Represented in Curriculum**

The fact that textbooks do not adequately address black history is directly related to the racism in America's past. Slave owners kept slaves from learning in order to keep them under control. Slaves were not allowed to go to school and most of them were not even allowed to learn how to read. The slave owners knew that if the slaves were educated they would be much more difficult to control and be more likely to form an organized revolt (Hughes 202). Even after the abolition of slavery, education was still used as a form of racial control. Most textbooks at the time contained racial slurs, and either neglected to address slavery or justified it (Zimmerman 56–67). During the Civil Rights Movement, there was a strong push to get rid of the racial issues with textbooks (Hughes 203). There were a few textbooks written right after the Civil Rights Movement that portrayed black history relatively well, however, there has not been much improvement since then (Hughes 203).

Another reason for this issue with the representation of black history comes from the fact that states with a relatively small black population are controlling the way black history is presented in textbooks. Texas and California have a large influence over the material that gets put into textbooks. These states use the same textbook for the entire state, so publishers would lose a big part of their profits if Texas and California stopped buying their textbooks (Watt 11). These two states even paid for some developmental costs in order to change textbook content (Watt 11). Because of this, publishers market their textbooks to these two states, which have a majority of white people. Texas and California have a smaller black population than some other states. The percentage of black people in Texas is 12.5 % and only 6.5% in California as opposed to 26% in Alabama and 31.5% in Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau). California and Texas play a large role in how black history is presented in textbooks

and yet neither of these states has a very large black population. These states with a large amount of control over textbook content and a small black population are likely to omit many achievements that black people have made.

### **Solutions**

There are several solutions to this issue of under-representing black history in textbooks and curriculum. The most effective way to do this would be to integrate black history into textbooks. Some people think that we should use an Afrocentric approach, meaning that schools with a predominantly black population should have textbooks that are mostly about black people (Grant 892). However, this would create a further separation between black and white students. The best solution is a multicultural textbook that talks about many different cultures. This solution will help students see how different groups have interacted and learn the best way accept each other's differences (Grant 894–895). Even though this is the best solution, it will likely be difficult to convince textbook companies to change textbooks in this way. Furthermore, even if textbook companies decided to change their textbooks, it would take a long time for schools to get the new textbooks. Until textbooks are changed there are other things that can be done to improve the way that black history is taught.

A simpler way to improve the representation of black history in schools would be to improve Black History Month. There are some teachers that have successfully used Black History Month as a platform to teach their students (King & Brown). One good way they have done this is by teaching biographies. Students typically learn about the main people that helped end slavery or helped in the Civil Rights Movement, but they don't know much about their lives. Teaching black history by using biographies will give the students a better understanding of what it was like to be black in that time period (Jans-Thomas). By teaching black history through biographies, students will gain a better understanding of the harmful effects of racism and hopefully try to avoid being racist as a result.

Black History Month can also be improved by teaching students about contributions made by black people that were not related to civil rights or slavery. Slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are indeed important; however, it is also important to show that black people have done other important things as well. For black students who are aspiring to be writers, scientists, inventors, or politicians, it is important for them to see that black people have been successful in those fields.

### **Conclusion**

Progress has been made in including black history into textbooks; however, there are still many changes that need to occur. Current high school US history textbooks still use language that perpetuate negative stereotypes about black people. They even create a black-versus-white mentality. Limiting the teaching of black history to the Civil Rights Movement and Black History Month encourages feelings of inferiority among black students. The reason that black history is portrayed this way has to do with America's history with racism and the control that states like California and Texas have over the content of textbooks. The best way to improve the representation of black history in textbooks is to use a multicultural approach. It may not be possible to immediately change textbooks and curriculum, but schools can at least enhance their Black History Month curriculum. Doing so would be one step further towards racial equality.

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