Why Can't We Teach This?

By: Nikita Stewart

In the preface to "The Geographical Reader for the Dixie Children," Marinda Branson Moore, a teacher who founded a girls' school in North Carolina, noted that she wanted to teach children about the world without it going over their heads. "The author of this little work, having found most of the juvenile books too complex for young minds, has for some time intended making an effort to simplify the science of Geography," she wrote. "If she shall succeed in bringing this beautiful and useful study within the grasp of little folks, and making it both interesting and pleasant, her purpose will be fully accomplished." The book was published in 1863, the same year as the Emancipation Proclamation and in the midst of the Civil War. Teachers could review the lessons with suggested questions in the back of the book. Part of Lesson IX's suggestions read:

Q. Which race is the most civilized?
A. The Caucasian.
Q. Is the African savage in this country?
A. No; they are docile and religious here.
Q. How are they in Africa where they first come from?
A. They are very ignorant, cruel and wretched.

More than a century and a half later, textbooks no longer publish such overt racist lies, but the United States still struggles to teach children about slavery.

Unlike math and reading, states are not required to meet academic content standards for teaching social studies and United States history. That means that there is no consensus on the curriculum around slavery, no uniform recommendation to explain an institution that was debated in the crafting of the Constitution and that has influenced nearly every aspect of American society since.

Think about what it would mean for our education system to properly teach students — young children and teenagers — about enslavement, what they would have to learn about our country. It's ugly. For generations, we've been unwilling to do it. Elementary-school teachers, worried about disturbing children, tell students about the "good" people, like the abolitionists and the black people who escaped to

freedom, but leave out the details of why they were protesting or what they were fleeing. Middle-school and high-school teachers stick to lesson plans from outdated textbooks that promote long-held, errant views. That means students graduate with a poor understanding of how slavery shaped our country, and they are unable to recognize the powerful and lasting effects it has had.

In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization that researches and monitors hate groups, pored over 12 popular U.S. history books and surveyed more than 1,700 social-studies teachers and 1,000 high-school seniors to understand how American slavery is taught and what is learned. The findings were disturbing: There was widespread slavery illiteracy among students. More than a third thought the Emancipation Proclamation formally ended slavery. (It was actually the 13th Amendment.) Nearly 60 percent of teachers did not believe their textbook's coverage of slavery was adequate. A panel made up of the center's staff, an independent education researcher with a background in middle- and high-school education and a history professor with expertise in the history of slavery looked at how the books depicted enslavement, evaluating them with a 30-point rubric. On average, the textbooks received a failing grade of 46 percent.

Maureen Costello, director of Teaching Tolerance, a program at the Southern Poverty Law Center that promotes diversity education, said the rubric used to analyze the textbooks was about seeing how the history of enslavement was integrated throughout a book and exactly what those contents were. In most teachings, she said, slavery is treated like a dot on a timeline. "The best textbooks maybe have 20 pages, and that's in an 800-page textbook," Costello told me. "At its best, slavery is taught because we have to explain the Civil War. We tend to teach it like a Southern problem and a backward economic institution. The North is industrialized; the South was locked in a backward agricultural system." About 92 percent of students did not know that slavery was the war's central cause, according to the survey.

So how did we get here? How have we been able to fail students for so long? Almost immediately after the Civil War, white Southerners and their sympathizers adopted an ideology called "the lost cause," an outlook that softened the brutality of enslavement and justified its immorality. One proponent of the ideology was Edward A. Pollard, whose book "The Lost Cause" transformed many Confederate generals and soldiers into heroes and argued that slavery was proper, because black people were inferior. The "lost cause" theory buried the truth that some 750,000 people died in a war because large numbers of white people wanted to maintain slavery. Over time, the theory became so ingrained in our collective thinking that even today people believe that the Civil War was about the South's asserting its rights against the North, not about slavery.

About 80 percent of this country's 3.7 million teachers are white, and white educators, some of whom grew up learning that the Civil War was about states' rights, generally have a hand in the selection of textbooks, which can vary from state to state and from school district to school district. "These decisions are being made by people who learned about slavery in a different way at a different time," Costello told me.

The law center's study focused on high-school students, but the miseducation of children generally begins much earlier. Teachers bungle history as soon as children are learning to read. Because teachers and parents are often so afraid to frighten children, they awkwardly spin the history of this country. They focus on a handful of heroes like Harriet Tubman, whose is picture is tacked to bulletin boards during Black History Month and Women's History Month. Elementary-school students learn about our nation's founders but do not learn that many of them owned slaves.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries is an associate professor of history at the Ohio State University and chair of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Hard History advisory board, which guided the 2017 survey. He is an expert on how slavery is taught and has watched the dynamics play out in his own household. He recalled how his 8-year-old daughter had a homework assignment that listed "fun facts" about George Washington, and it noted his love of rabbits. Jeffries corrected the assignment. "He loved rabbits and owned rabbits," Jeffries said. "He owned people, too," he told his daughter. The assignment said he lost his teeth and had to have dentures. "Yes, he had teeth made from slaves." Jeffries and teachers in upper grades I talked to around the country say they spend the beginning of their presentations on slavery explaining to students that what they learned in elementary school was not the full story and possibly not even true. "We are committing educational malpractice," Jeffries told me. A report published last year by the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Eduction Policy, a research institute focused on K-12 issues in American public schools, examined social-studies teachers and found that there is limited testing accountability. Social studies is "largely absent from federal education law and policy," the report found, which arguably makes it a "second-tier academic" subject. More than half the high-school seniors surveyed reported that debate in the classroom — a proven practice of good teaching — was infrequent.

I was lucky; my Advanced Placement United States history teacher regularly engaged my nearly all-white class in debate, and there was a clear focus on learning about slavery beyond Tubman, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass, the people I saw hanging on the bulletin board during Black History Month. We used "The American Pageant," a textbook first published in 1956 and now in its 17th edition.

It's a book that, although not failing, was still found to be lacking by the Southern Poverty Law Center's survey. It graded books based on how they treated 10 different key concepts, such as establishing that slavery was the central cause of the Civil War or explaining that the country's founding documents are filled with protections for slavery. A modern edition of the book I used received a 60 percent mark, barely adequate.

Thomas A. Bailey, a professor of history at Stanford University, was the textbook's original author. Bailey was influenced by what is known as the Dunning School, a school of thought arguing that the period of Reconstruction was detrimental to white Southerners and that black people were incapable of participating in democracy. This theory, along with the older "lost cause" ideology, helped to reinforce Jim Crow laws. In the 1970s, David M. Kennedy, a colleague of Bailey's at Stanford, was brought in to revise the book. "It was clear that the textbook needed to be updated in alignment with current scholarship," Kennedy said. Now he and a third co-author, Lizabeth Cohen, revisit three or four topics whenever they work on a new edition. He pointed to their efforts to show the impact of slavery on modern anti-black racism.

And yet Costello points at troubling language that continues to appear in the book. Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, who was enslaved by him, is described as "intimacy" and an "affair." Another passage, from the 15th edition, states: "White masters all too frequently would force their attentions on female slaves, fathering a sizable mulatto population, most of which remained enchained." Costello noted that "it's really a rather delicate way of describing rape." This section has since been edited, but the 15th edition remains in print. It's a reminder that although textbooks like "The American Pageant" are evolving, it's a slow process, and in the interim, misinformation about slavery persists.

Tiferet Ani, a social-studies specialist for the public-school system in Montgomery County, Md., is in charge of shaping the curriculum for her colleagues. She recommends using textbooks lightly and teaching students to challenge them. Ani, like so many teachers around the country, has been influenced by the law center's report. "The textbook is not an authoritative document," she told me. She and other teachers rely more on primary sources. Montgomery County is just outside Washington, so Ani can take her students to the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Many black children learn the fuller history at home, listening to the stories passed down to us or reflecting on what was never shared. Earlier this year, while looking up some information about my grandmother, I stumbled upon her father, my great-grandfather Nap McQueen. There he was in a

black-and-white photo, looking straight into the camera, in a long-sleeve shirt, slacks and a hat. He was enslaved as a boy, and he was one of more than 2,300 formerly enslaved people interviewed for the Federal Writers' Project's Slave Narratives. He was vivid in his recollection — how he was born in Tennessee and taken to Texas by wagon. His enslaver, he said, "was a good massa," in part because he allowed McQueen to go fishing and hunting on the weekends, and his enslaver wouldn't draw blood during whippings. His enslaver treated his property so well, he said, that they were the envy of enslaved people on other plantations.

ALT Text: Black and white photograph of a man standing in a long-sleeve shirt, slacks and a hat

Caption: Nap McQueen, the author's great-grandfather, photographed in Texas around 1936. From the Library of Congress

Nap McQueen's words disappointed me. I was embarrassed. My great-grandfather had echoed the "lost cause" ideology.

He talked about how his enslaver lined up all the enslaved people and announced that they were free. They could leave, his enslaver said, or they could stay, and he would give them some land. My family stayed, making a life in Woodville, Tex.

But then my great-grandfather shifted his attention to telling a story about a monkey owned by an enslaver on another plantation. The monkey, which was allowed to roam freely throughout the plantation, imitated everything humans did. It was annoying. Once, the monkey was used to play a prank on an enslaved man who thought the monkey, dressed in a white tablecloth, was a ghost. The man could not kill the monkey because it was "de massa's pet," but knowing that the monkey copied everything, the man shaved in front of it. The monkey picked up the razor "and cut he own throat and killed hisself," McQueen said. That's exactly what the man wanted, my great-grandfather said. "He feel satisfy dat de monkey done dead and he have he revengence."

It's a crazy story, seemingly so off the subject and so out of character for a man who obviously tried to present himself as a good, law-abiding Negro, the kind of man who would not steal the cotton he picked on your behalf. Why tell a story about the gratification of killing something the enslaver loved? My great-grandfather's words are my primary source. A whipping without blood is still a whipping. And I believe my great-grandfather shared the story of the monkey because he admired the other man for finding a way to get a little bit of justice. He wanted listeners to understand the horror of the institution, even if he was too afraid to condemn it outright. For me, it's a reminder of what our schools fail to do: bring this history alive, using stories like these to help us understand the evil our nation was founded on.