

Peaceful Animals: A Look into Black Pacifism and the Pedagogy of Civil Rights in American Public Education

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The following are the key points of the American civil rights movement according to current United States public education curricula. First, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King nobly campaigned for peace and nonviolence. Then Rosa Parks, feeling tired, refused to give up her seat on a bus. Another figure, Malcolm X, was similar to King but he was violent. And then tragically, a random actor shot Dr. King in the cheek. That is where the story usually ends. American racial tensions subsided until the election of Barack Obama. This oversimplification reflects the entirety of the knowledge imparted to many who have experienced the United States public education system.

American history education is, in a word, lacking. United States history curricula downplay the impact felt by marginalized groups in this country, producing alarming results. This paper asserts that the pedagogy of Black history in American middle and high school public education centers around convenient and pointed narratives. Especially with regard to forms of protests during the civil rights movement, these narratives have been intentionally structured in a manner that, by way of purposeful omission and harmful misinterpretation, promote the passivity and pacifism of Black Americans.

Obtaining accurate and comprehensive information about the Black American condition is an endeavor that one must explicitly elect to partake in. Simple reflection by anyone who has been exposed to American public education reveals that the most prominent figures discussed are white. The history of minority groups seldom sees the light within core curricula. This contemporary self-taught requirement for knowledge acquisition directly parallels to American Slavery. As explored in *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Free-*

dom by Heather Andrea Williams, African ¹Americans' quest for education has historically been an uphill battle. Unsurprisingly, society rarely provided enslaved individuals a means to an education. The barriers to literacy and other such skills have historically been high. In 1830, North Carolina passed a statute making the education of slaves—either by freedmen or other slaves—a harshly punishable crime.² The internal logic of the law operated with an understanding of the relationship between denial of education and self-preservation of the system. As Frederick Douglass states in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*: “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers.”³ By affording knowledge and context to the oppressed, the oppressor risks lessening their status as such. Douglass' education directly facilitated his liberation and eventual coalescence into the abolition movement. While the laws may have changed, the mechanisms that work to suppress Black political action remain as a product of Black history education.

To understand this, one must first endeavor to comprehend the pedagogical evolution of the gravest ill inflicted upon Black bodies in America: equating Black people with animals. Intense and categorical dehumanization is a central part of the institution of slavery. In the US Constitution, Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3: the Three-Fifths Compromise, the language of dehumanization of Black people is codified into the most important document of the American polity. Societal justifications and the cognitive dissonance required for the institution of slavery are well discussed in modern academic literature. Broadly speaking, however, the afterlives and scope of the brutality of slavery continue to be poorly understood. In his work *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley, Malcolm X balked at the historical knowledge that the average Black American possessed, saying “it's unbelievable how many black men and women have let the white man fool them into holding an almost romantic idea of what slave days were like.”⁴ Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, slavery was often suggested to be a mutually beneficial situation. In return for food and shelter, slaves provided free labor to their masters. This specific framing is fortunately less common than in previous eras. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that this erroneous pedagogy

1 Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

2 Act Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina at the Session of 1830—1831.

3 Frederick Douglass, Gregory Stephens, and Peter J. Gomes, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, 35.

4 Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine, 1992, 217.

is a relic of the past.

In 2015, the *New York Times* revealed that a textbook by major publishing company McGraw-Hill Education printed the phrase “the Atlantic Slave Trade... brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.”⁵ This example of nomenclature choice presents an active rewriting of history. The word “workers” implies a compensation that was non-existent in American slavery. Captured Africans and American Blacks were used as currency; they did not receive it. These specific and at times subtle framings contribute to the understating of American slavery. Every individual choice of diction carries moral and political content. It is in the exact verbiage of American historical documents that laid the groundwork for the evolving and sustained systems of Black oppression. If in contemporary times the basic foundations of Black people being in America are understood as a consensual employment, then the opportunity for discussion of the continued maltreatment of Black people has no foothold.

After some controversy, McGraw-Hill Education acknowledged the error. However, the “misprinted” issues will likely circulate for years to come.⁶ This instance, which some would consider an outlier, does not deviate significantly from the actual standards. Improvement from past pedagogies is undeniable, however, the present approach to education does not adequately capture the brutalities and atrocities of enslavement. The current educational system cannot afford proper context for the current state of being for the Black individual, without recognizing the inhuman cruelty that has been historically inflicted upon the Black community in America. Simultaneously, members of unafflicted groups have less of a basis from which they can understand contentions asserting the continued existence of institutional racism.

Racism is deeply woven into many facets of society, making it difficult to pinpoint parties solely responsible for the historical miseducation of American youth. However, when it comes to a substantial portion of the information diffused throughout the nation, few governing bodies have more of a direct impact than the Texas Board of Education. Former social studies textbook editor Dan Quinn states: “What happens in Texas doesn’t stay in Texas when it comes to textbooks.”⁷ The Texas market for textbooks is unequivocally large. Therefore, the guidelines set in place by this body have profound implications on the textbooks received by

5 Manny Fernandez and Christine Hauser, “Texas Mother Teaches Textbook Company a Lesson on Accuracy,” *The New York Times*, 2015, Web. 13 Sept. 2016.

6 Meloncyee McAfee, “McGraw-Hill to Rewrite Textbook after Mom’s Complaint,” *CNN*. Cable News Network, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

7 Gail Collins, “How Texas Inflicts Bad Textbooks on Us,” *The New York Review of Books*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.

much of the nation.

This reality is extremely troublesome when we look at both statements made by board officials and some of the recent sets of the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* (TEKS), which outlines the curriculum required for Texas public schools. After the board adopted the then-new standards in 2010, board member Pat Hardy was quoted saying “there would be those who would say the reason for the Civil War was over slavery. No. It was over states’ rights.”⁸ While this statement is from 2010, its impact and that of other comments like it are still apparent and intensely relevant. A 2018 survey of one thousand high school seniors by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that only eight percent of students can correctly identify slavery as the central cause of the civil war.⁹ Attempts to relegate slavery to an insignificant role takes away agency from Black individuals who sought their liberation through their tireless strife against slavery.

Correcting pedagogy is a particularly challenging endeavor. The agents of that change—educators and guideline setters—are often the products of miseducation themselves. The Southern Poverty Law Center notes that “teachers struggle to do justice to the nation’s legacy of racial injustice. They are poorly served by state standards and frameworks, popular textbooks and even their own academic preparation.”¹⁰ The Texas State Board of Education did recently agree to acknowledge the centrality of slavery in the Civil War. While credit is due, this is merely a starting line and does not rectify the other deficiencies in standards or the in-classroom experience of teaching with racial ineptitude.

The official *TEKS* has only included Jim Crow Laws and the Ku Klux Klan as teaching requirements as of the November 2018 revisions.¹¹ This former exclusion again has contributed to the dismissal of suffering crucial to contextualization. However, the document has long since mentioned the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.¹² King’s remarkable contributions towards assisting the Black condition are undeniable and merit inclusion into educational standards. However, the way the American education system broaches King further promotes the pacification of the Black race.

The current collective consciousness greatly downplays the radicalism of King and fellow Civil Rights leader Rosa Parks. Peter Dreier, a professor of politics

8 Emma Brown, “Texas officials: Schools should teach that slavery was ‘side issue’ to Civil War,” *The Washington Post*. Web. 5 December 2016.

9 Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Teaching Hard History American Slavery,” Web. 17 Nov. 2018, 19.

10 Southern Poverty Law Center, “Teaching Hard History American Slavery,” 12.

11 Lauren McGaughy, “Texas History Curriculum: Hillary Clinton and Alamo ‘Heroes’ Are in. Oprah’s Out.” *Dallas News*, 16 Nov. 2018, www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2018/11/13/texas-education-board-debate-eliminating-helen-keller-hillary-clinton-others-history-curriculum, 11.

12 Texas Education Agency (TEA), “Texas Education Agency - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies,” Web. 4 Dec. 2016, 7.

and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy department at Occidental College, discusses how “in the popular legend, Parks is portrayed as a tired old seamstress...who, on the spur of the moment...decided to resist the city’s segregation law by refusing to move to the back of the bus on December 1, 1955.”¹³ However, Dreier continues to explain that the reality of the situation was that the move came as a result of a massive coordinated effort on the part of veteran activists. This account is corroborated by (among other sources) Taylor Branch’s *Parting the Waters*, Stewart Burns’ *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, and Rosa Parks’ autobiography, *My Story*.¹⁴ The removal from America’s shared memory of the careful and calculated effort to dismantle Jim Crow sells short the scale of the effort required to uproot institutional boundaries. He continues, “Contemporary struggles for justice...may seem modest by comparison to the movements of the 1960s that began in Montgomery in 1955.”¹⁵ The false yet ubiquitous narrative of the *she was tired, so she sat* cause and effect ignores the radical line of thinking that openly and actively defies American racism. The simplification of Parks’ actions in education resources does not accurately depict the radical schools of thought that she exemplified.

The pacified version of King, provided to the average American student, debases his radical ideas and uses them to combat current political and social movements. King has often been haphazardly invoked in attempts to pacify or condemn post-police brutality rioters or NFL protesters. We live in a time where it is antiquated to believe that online comments hold no relevance in the grander discourse. The term internet “trolls” is currently included in official reports created by top United States Federal Agencies.¹⁶ Posts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter or other such sites are legitimate reflections of the society in which they originated. As such, the vitriol and ignorance found in online commentary are troubling indications of mass miseducation. Politicians and individuals use specifically-curated King quotes to fit whatever narrative is convenient. This pacified version of King is then in turn used to pacify Black people. These protest-dissenting claims bear no mind to the wider breadth of the King library of thought—which includes the September 27th, 1966 CBS interview, in which King stated: “I think that we’ve got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard.”¹⁷ Dr. King’s vocabulary was not limited to the four word phrase “I have a dream.” While he may not have endorsed violence in the context of social movements, it is apparent that King’s thoughts on

13 Peter Dreier, “Rosa Parks: Angry, Not Tired,” *Dissent* 53.1 (2006): 88.

14 Dreier, “Rosa Parks: Angry, Not Tired,” 88.

15 Dreier, “Rosa Parks: Angry, Not Tired,” 92.

16 United States NSA, CIA, FBI, ICA, Background to “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections”: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2017.

17 Lily Rothman, “What Martin Luther King Jr Really Thought About Riots,” *Time*. Time, n.d. Web. 05 Dec. 2016, 2.

riots would not align with those who often champion his name.

In modern America, King is near universally understood to be a figure worthy of praise. It is so often forgotten that King was fiercely unpopular with the majority of society for much of his life. In 1966, the Gallup measure of King polled his admiration levels at 32% positive and 63% negative.¹⁸ Yet modern mythos takes this for granted. The education system inserts into popular consciousness a particular mold of how an oppressed Black person seeking change should act. That mold is a very corrupted memory of Dr. King.

To call King strictly nonviolent is itself misleading. While King's rhetoric may have been very deliberate, one can not divorce racism from violence. King and his followers employed a disciplined sacrifice of the Black body. The violence was there. It simply was not directed towards white bodies or white property. We are presented with King because he is comparatively easy to digest. His general message of nonviolence is malleable. Little to no emphasis is regarded to the failures, shortcomings, and bitter reality of the civil rights movement as a means for achieving social change. Despite King's desire to expose the grave violence of racism, the presented, pared down version of him does not force us as a collective to deeply explore the gravity of the injustices placed against Black people. A firehose directed at protestors, while shocking and horrific, still rests easier on people's minds than the state-sponsored murder of Black Panther Captains.

Further, the High School *TEKS* does briefly mention the Black Panther Party for the sake of contrasting their beliefs with those of MLK.¹⁹ The author of this paper, themself a product of Texas high school public education, can attest that in practice this comparison amounts to a further dismissal of the validity of their actions—while touting King's "peaceful" approach. Neither the middle school nor high school *TEKS* makes reference to King's influential counterpart, Malcolm X. Again anecdotally, mentions of Malcolm X consists of characterizing him as violent and little else.

In the civil rights section of the *San Jacinto Museum's Curriculum Guide for Teaching Texas History*, which aligns with *TEKS*, Non-Violent Protest is the first critical vocabulary point. Shortly thereafter, the curriculum suggests that "students should have a basic knowledge of the rights of United States' citizens to petition the government for a solution to grievances."²⁰ Again, while there is validity in

18 Gallup, Inc, "Martin Luther King Jr.: Revered More After Death Than Before," Gallup.com, 16 Jan. 2006, news.gallup.com/poll/20920/martin-luther-king-jr-revered-more-after-death-than-before.aspx.

19 Texas Education Agency "Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies," 9.

20 Yvonne Pittman, Elizabeth Appleby, and Lisa Stuthers, "Curriculum Guide for Teaching Texas History,"

discussion around this form of protest, the same section draws the parallel to the “Declaration of Independence as a list of complaints by the colonists against King George in England.”²¹ It is ironic that a proudly boasted and bloody revolution was subsequent to that list of complaints, while Black Power groups, which almost exclusively subscribed to revolutionary mentalities, receive no mention in the Guide. In America, “violence” is an acceptable means to achieve an end as long as those who carry it out are not of a dark complexion.

The themes of what has been selectively chosen to receive praise or condemnation in our teachings of history, while not surprising, have dire implications. In America, passivity and pacifism are standards that are disproportionately held to Black and Brown bodies. Malcolm X articulated this point to an LA crowd in 1962:

The white man is tricking you. He’s trapping you. He doesn’t call it violence when he lands troops in South Vietnam. He doesn’t call it violence when he lands troops in Berlin. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he didn’t say get nonviolent. He said, “Praise the Lord but pass the ammunition.”²²

The double standard outlined by X places boundaries on current political efforts lest they risk misaligning with the beliefs of the deified King.

The complexities of Malcolm X’s ever-evolving racial beliefs cannot be justly covered within the scope of this paper. But the classification of his actions and beliefs as merely violent is wildly inaccurate and harmful. X’s more direct and introspective approach presents a perspective that we can not afford to remove from education standards. Major influential names of the Black Power movement similarly receive no mention. For example, the status quo completely ignores the perspectives of Fred Hampton, the young Panther captain who was assassinated by the FBI, and Robert F. Williams, author of the book *Negroes with Guns*. This erasure limits both Americans’ understanding of the context in which these ideologies evolved and their understanding of the options available to combat systemic oppression. The omission of these figures is indicative of a larger narrative that operates under the impression that Blacks are innately dangerous creatures, and therefore should not be encouraged to take a bold and active role in liberation, lest they risk harming white Americans. America frowns upon the idea that Blacks should either want or need to defend themselves. The absence of these individuals

San Jacinto Museum of History One Monument Circle, Jan 8, 2013, 262.

21 Pittman, Appleby, and Stuthers, “Curriculum Guide for Teaching Texas History,” 262.

22 Malcolm X, “The White Man is Tricking You!” Nation of Islam, Los Angeles 22 May, 1962.

(X included) from not only *TEKS* but the *AP US History Guideline* and Common Core standards is indicative of the devaluation of an entire school of thought.²³

There are subjective flaws in the ideologies of both King and X. However, by only providing a simplified and one-sided narrative of the pursuit for Black Liberation, the historical curriculum discourages radical approaches of combating deeply rooted problems. Education's intrinsic relationship with a successful society is best defined by iconic author James Baldwin in 1963:

Man is a social animal. He cannot exist without a society...Now the crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society. Thus, for example, the boys and girls who were born during the era of the Third Reich, when educated to the purposes of the Third Reich, became barbarians. The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself...But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish.²⁴

By leaving out parts of the story, the United States stifles the consistent efforts of radicals and revolutionaries to reveal evidence of how the country has undermined the civil rights of Black Americans in the past and present. Our education system helps to perpetuate a narrative of both Black inhumanity and Black pacifism. In order to give Black youth the tools to contextualize and confront the contemporary manifestations of racism that our education system neglects to address, US public education must deliberately address the duality of the civil rights movement: a struggle for Black Liberation that has been both peaceful and violent.

23 AP® United States History Including the Curriculum Framework” and “Common Core Standard

24 James Baldwin, “The Negro Child - His self Image,” 16 October 1963, Lecture.

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