

How textbooks taught white supremacy

A historian steps back to the 1700s and shares what's changed and what needs to change

Historian Donald Yacovone, an associate at the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research and a 2013 winner of the W.E.B. Du Bois medal, was researching a book on the legacy of the antislavery movement when he came across some old history school textbooks that stopped him cold and led him to write a different book.

Yacovone, who

The Gazette interviewed Yacovone about the origins of his research, his slavery and white supremacy and their legacies.

Q&A

Donald Yacovone

How did you start examining history textbooks from the 19th and 20th centuries?

I had begun a different book about the legacy of the antislavery movement and the rise of the Civil Rights era. I had spent several months at the Houghton Library before it closed down. When I was nearly finished with one particularly large collection, I wanted to take a break and find out how abolitionism had been taught in school textbooks. I thought this was a good idea. I went to the Graduate School of Education, took a look at a few textbooks, and kept going. Imagine my shock when I was confronted by a collection of about 3,000 textbooks. I started reviewing them, and I came across one from 1832 that was responsible for our dictionary. I was astonished by what I was reading so I just kept reading some more.

Slavery, despite the fact that it was an American institution. There were no African Americans ever mentioned. When Webster wrote about Africans, it was extremely derogatory, which was shocking because those comments were in a textbook. What I realized from his book, and from the subsequent work, was that anything that was less than an Anglo Saxon was not a true American. The further along I got in this process, the more intensely this sentiment came out, I realized that I was looking at a system that was designed to keep white people as the dominant group. What these books were teaching.

Southern slavery, and this thinking has all

What are the roots of white supremacy? How is white supremacy connected to the history of slavery?

White supremacy precedes the origins of the United States. Every aspect of social interaction, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, was

dominated by white identity, and white supremacy became an expression of American identity.

Americans tend to see racism as a result of Southern slavery, and this thinking has all kinds of problems. First of all, slavery was in the North as well as in the South, and the people who formed the idea of American identity were not Southern slave owners, they were Northerners. The father of white supremacy was not a Southerner; it was John H. Van Evrie, a Canadian who ended up settling in New York City. Van Evrie argued that if no slaves existed, the class-based structure of Europe would have been transferred, kept, and developed in the American colonies. But with the African presence

core they were driven by their ideas of racial superiority, which of course were pure fiction and had nothing to do with reality. White supremacy

and it preceded the birth of the United States.

American presence there. Many Northerners advocated the American Colonization Society, which would export African Americans to Liberia. But there was no unanimity of ideas about white supremacy; the only thing

During the brief period of Reconstruction (1863-1877), the story emphasized the fulfillment of democracy, and the ideology of freedom suffused many books. This was a dramatic change. I even came across a couple of books that contained pictures of African Americans, and I was flabbergasted when I discovered one that had a picture of Frederick Douglass that was unheard of. Prior to Reconstruction, textbooks had a few pictures, some engravings. But they disappear pretty quick once we get to the 1920s. In the 1920s, academia and white supremacy reappears with full force.

read when you were a fifth grader. What did that book teach you about the history of slavery?

That was one of the great revelations of this research. Like so many others, which was published repeatedly between 1953 and 1965, said almost nothing. All these books, particularly from 1840 for the next 25 years, go out of their way to not discuss slavery. Some would say that slavery began in 1619 but most said it began in 1620 because those who are writing this narrative are New Englanders, and 1620 is when the Pilgrims sailed on the Mayflower. Half the books from this early period got the date wrong. If the textbooks wrote about slavery, it was only one

states there are institutionalized approval processes that determine what textbook will be used. And as far as the publishing industry is concerned, this is huge money. Texas and California dominate and they determine

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What are the risks of not teaching the full story of slavery and its legacy?

This is essential work that has to be done. If America is to be a nation that fulfills its democratic promise, the history of slavery and white supremacy have to be taught in schools across the country. We need to acknowledge that white supremacy remains an integral part of American society and we need to understand how we got to where we are. The consequences of not doing so are lethal. White supremacy is a toxin. The older history textbooks were like syringes that injected the toxin of white supremacy into the mind of many generations of Americans. What has to be taught is the origins, as the cause of the Civil War, and about its legacy that still lives on.

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