



CHAPTER 4

Teaching to the Test: Undermining Academic Rebellion (2020s)

Abstract Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) courses offered in high schools, and the materials learned from them, have important implications for students. Since APUSH courses can be used as college credit, some young people might not even take a subsequent history course when in college—making the curricula in these classes all the more important. This chapter looks specifically at a 2020 textbook titled *Fabric of a Nation* used for APUSH courses. Out of all the textbooks looked at in this analysis, *Fabric of a Nation* is undoubtedly the most inclusive and most up to date. It prompts critical thinking and includes more accurate historical context. However, the book is not perfect. It continues to reinforce Native American passivity and doesn't expand enough on issues of immigration when it comes to Mexican and im/migrant representations.

Keywords Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) • Critical thinking • Passivity • Immigration • Representation • Curricula • Textbooks • Teachers

INTRODUCTION: A TEST'S TEXTBOOK

The Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) class, since its creation in 1955, has become a high school benchmark that operates on many levels. For students, AP classes enforce academic divisions that in turn foster

social ones. “Smart kids”—those planning to go to college—take AP classes, while “everyone else” takes regular classes. AP classes are also measurement benchmarks for the high schools and teachers who offer them. High schools that offer fewer AP classes are ranked lower and considered less academically robust than those that offer numerous AP courses. For AP teachers, in some schools, student AP scores are part of their annual job reviews. As a result, many teachers have vested interests in teaching to the test to ensure high student scores.

APUSH classes are taken to be equivalents to college-level courses, but available to students in high school. Classes cater to students identified as college-bound, and AP credit earned with top scores on AP exams will usually be accepted by colleges and universities in lieu of taking comparable courses at college. If students earn enough AP credits across multiple subjects, they can sometimes graduate college a semester early, save tuition expenses, or add space to their schedules for other opportunities.

Textbooks for APUSH classes are distinct from those for non-AP US history classes—in fact, they are rarely the same book. In the far Northern California schools I focused on in my fieldwork, APUSH classes have entirely distinct textbooks and related but separate curricula. AP textbooks are defined by repetitive exercises designed to prepare students for the standardized test. The constraints of the test have implications for teachers too. AP courses are expected to be the same across the United States because the purpose is to prepare students for the standardized test (College Board 2022).

APUSH has been highly controversial over the years, with a range of polemics on what content should be covered. Because AP classes are part of the business empire of standardized testing, there is a lot of money to be made from both the textbooks and the tests themselves. This has only expanded in the 2020s in light of the 2023 elimination of Critical Race Theory from the AP African American History curriculum (Wright 2023). Educational content, and AP content in particular, has been an arena of contestation over ideas around wokeness and political correctness versus what others might term freedom of speech. This chapter explores the details of one APUSH textbook currently in use in far Northern California to better understand how representations of Native Americans and Mexican im/migrant people play out on its pages.

2020: NATIVE AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN *FABRIC OF A NATION*

Stacy and Ellington’s *Fabric of a Nation: A Brief History with Skills and Sources* was designed for use in Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) courses. This book was used in the APUSH course at Eureka High School during the 2021–2022 school year. In general, this book shows some major improvements from earlier reviewed textbooks in terms of updated identity-first language (e.g., “enslaved Africans” rather than “slaves”) and inclusion of Native American resistance rather than only depictions of domination by settler-colonists.

There are many attempts at open-ended questions in *Fabric of a Nation* that try to promote critical thinking, but they end up asking the wrong questions. For example, a painting of the Seneca Chief Cornplanter, child of a White father and Native American mother, is captioned by the question, “What elements of this portrait portray the influence of European culture on Cornplanter?” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 200). Yet, shouldn’t Cornplanter, who fought on the British side during the Revolutionary War and then encouraged assimilation by American Indians afterward, evoke more questions than just those of physical appearance? How could Cornplanter’s biracial identity impact his political choices? What would motivate a Native American Chief to cede territory or sign treaties with settlers? *Fabric of a Nation* is a book for high schoolers—young people who are already driving vehicles and will be eligible to vote in a year or two. It is also a highly contemporary book that has been updated in multiple ways through both text and image inclusion. High schoolers, especially those in an APUSH class, are capable of answering more difficult questions than the above example. Students can be asked hard questions, and they can grapple with confronting answers.

But *Fabric of a Nation* is still very confined in preparing students for the AP test that the College Board has defined. It is set up for students to excel on the test, so that teachers get the kinds of professional rewards their schools and districts have attached to high test pass rates. The content redundancy and practice test content are not seen in non-APUSH textbooks. This book is explicitly teaching to the AP test at every step. While much of the volume does promote a deeper kind of critical thinking than non-APUSH textbooks, many of the practice questions have seemingly innocuous multiple-choice questions. Even if they lead to a non-racist answer, the questions themselves include racist or discriminatory

options that render these alarming views included and prevalent in the volume itself, even if they are not the correct answer on the test. For example, in one practice area, a map labeled “American Indian Economies, Late 15th Century” shows where Native Americans were hunting, fishing, and farming. The multiple-choice practice question then asks:

This map best supports which conclusion about American Indian economies before European contact?

- A. American Indian economies were less advanced than those in Europe.
- B. American Indians lived a more “natural” lifestyle than Europeans.
- C. American Indian economies were diverse and adapted to local resources.
- D. American Indians exhibited a greater respect for natural resources than Europeans. (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 39d)

Options A, B, and D all feed into stereotypes of Native American people. Even though C is the correct answer, A, B, and D reinforce said stereotypes just by being viable options on the page. Though the text around the map and question delivers the information students need to make the right choice, this example points to the impact of standardized curricula as tools to both deliver information and incidentally reinforce misinformation.

Strikingly, the captions still outline a worldview that is deeply problematic, like in the heading “Westward Expansion and Indian Resistance” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 449). Phrasing of White-Native American relations are spaces of reoccurring problematic representation in this textbook as well as its predecessors. For example, in this sentence, “Puritans and Pilgrims faced serious threats from their American Indian neighbors” (76), the structural context gives readers a one-sided view of threat. Sentences like this are sprinkled throughout the textbook. Though it is factually true—Native Americans did attack settlers sometimes—they did so far less than they were attacked by settlers, which is hardly mentioned. In fact, Native Americans faced serious threat from Puritans and Pilgrims, but this reverse presentation is never made in this or in any other standard textbook I reviewed.

Fabric of a Nation does include a discussion that is a significant improvement from earlier textbooks covering this period. In a section titled, “American Indian Removals and Relocations, 1820s–1840s” (315), the accompanying map shows arrows of forced removal and asks readers the

question “What do these maps reveal about the impact of American expansionism on American Indians?” (315). While arguably “colonialization” would be a more accurate word choice instead of expansionism, this illustration and accompanying text does show harm toward Native Americans in ways that begin to balance the claim that Natives were “serious threats” to Puritans and Pilgrims.

In addition, *Fabric of a Nation* is one of the few textbooks I reviewed that explicitly point out false images previously in circulation. The image titled “Cherokee Removal, 1838” appears with text that says:

This woodcut appeared in a U.S. geography textbook from about 1850. The title “Indian Emigrants” and the image of Cherokee disembarking from a steamboat falsely suggests that the emigration was voluntary and the means of travel relatively easy. The U.S. fort on the hill symbolizes the role of the federal government in forcing the Cherokee to move west of the Mississippi. Based on the title of this image and its portrayal of the Cherokee, what was the purpose of the woodcut? Explain your reasoning. (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 316)

This is a significant historical correction. I wanted the authors to offer even more information about the “Indian Emigrants” image. For example, how long did that image stay in textbooks, misinforming students about the Cherokee removal? Perhaps that is a project for another researcher.

Native American treatment as agentic people in *Fabric of a Nation* appears mixed at many points. The Dawes Act, passed in 1887 as an assimilatory tactic to force the division of tribal lands into homesteads, is discussed as being based on “flawed cultural assumptions. Even the most sensitive white administrators of American Indian affairs considered them a degraded race, in accordance with the scientific thinking of the time” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 457). The textbook makes clear that the Dawes Act was detrimental to tribes, which is true. But ill treatment by the government continued.

During WWI, to save money the federal government had ceased appropriating funds for public health programs aimed at benefiting American Indians living on reservations. With the war over, the government failed to restore the funds. Throughout the 1920s, rates of tuberculosis, eye infections, and infant mortality spiked among the American Indian population. Boarding schools continued to promote menial service jobs for American Indian stu-

dents. On the brighter side, in 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act granting citizenship and the right to vote to all AIs. Nevertheless, most remained outside the economic and political mainstream of American society with meager government help. (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 630)

On the one hand, in the excerpt above, the authors do an important historical service in showing government neglect. At the same time, it is problematic to say the Indian Citizenship Act was “on the brighter side,” when federal government did not consult with Native Americans about their interest in becoming citizens in the first place; Native Americans did not get to negotiate what those rights even looked like. In this way, even as the authors try to show a more balanced snapshot of government policy violence on one front, they highlight the paternalism of granting citizenship without consultation as being on the “bright side” of government behavior.

This lack of Native American agency is continued in discussion of the 1934 Indian Reservation Act, which “terminated the Dawes Act, authorized self-government for those living on reservations, extended tribal landholdings, and pledged to uphold native customs and language” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 658). While this is factually what happened, it is again written as something done to Native people rather than something they had agency over defining for themselves.

In general, *Fabric of a Nation* conveys information in ways that prompt critical thinking, even if that critical thinking is channeled solely to excel on the APUSH exam. Sometimes the information it conveys pushes readers to understand White violence toward Native Americans during colonization, and other times, the way the information is written, even if factually correct, continues to reinforce notions of Native American passivity. Like most other textbooks I reviewed, *Fabric of a Nation* confines Native Americans to the beginning of the book and does not circle back to show contemporary Native life beyond brief mention of resistance to assimilation (459) and the American Indian Movement takeover of Alcatraz Island of 1972 (774).

Even though the book allots space for some sensitive treatment of Native Americans, they are mostly treated as historical and obsolete, as in this passage under the heading “American Indian Civilizations”: “The frontier was home to diverse peoples long before white and immigrant settlers appeared. The many native groups who inhabited the West spoke distinct languages, engaged in different economic activities, and competed

with one another for power and resources” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 452). It would be easier to educate high school students about the contemporary existence of Native American people when they are described in more ways rather just in the past tense as they are throughout hundreds of pages of scholarly textbooks like this one.

INDIGENOUS, MEXICAN, AND IM/MIGRANT REPRESENTATION IN *FABRIC OF A NATION* (2020)

When my family lived in Mexico during multiple iterations of my fieldwork for previous projects, I taught my daughter about Mexico’s Malinche,¹ who, in a story similar to that of Pocahontas, learned multiple languages when she was enslaved and became a translator (and concubine) for Hernán Cortés. *Fabric of a Nation* presents an image of Malinche with Cortés meeting Montezuma at Tenochtitlán in 1519 (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 31) that particularly stuck with me. Though the amount of page space devoted to Malinche is more than in previous volumes, this textbook still directs students to draw broad generalizations that move away from structural critiques of colonization and exploitation.

The caption below the image of Malinche states: “It is a reproduction of an image created by Tlaxcalan artists and represents an American Indian perspective on these events. Identify Cortés, Malintzin, and Montezuma. What can you infer about the artist’s attitude toward Cortés and Malintzin based on this image?” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 31). That there could be one “American Indian” perspective as denoted by the caption is a highly generalized assumption. It also oversimplifies Indigenous people. Indigenous to what group? Were they the victors or the vanquished in the war with Cortés? Were artisans of this era generally wealthy or poor? Pro-Malinche or contra? Why not ask students to consider how colonialism shaped Malinche’s options in the meeting with Cortés and Montezuma, or how enslavement structurally alters people’s lives?

In line with my coding of other textbooks, I note that *Fabric of a Nation*’s treatment of the Alamo is the most improved of any other textbook to date. The authors note that, in 1936, “American newspapers picked up the story of the Alamo and published accounts of the battle, describing the Mexican fighters as brutal butchers bent on saving Texas for the pope. These stories, though more fable than fact, increased popular

¹ Malinche’s name is sometimes represented as Malintzin.

support for the war at a time when many Americans were increasingly hostile to Catholic immigrants in the United States” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 312). This accounting shows the political impetus for “fable,” which facilitates a structural critique of US propaganda in characterizing Mexican soldiers as butchers, providing a much-improved rendition of the Alamo.

At the same time, the book’s insistence on using the term “expansion” in relation to the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) (360) and elsewhere (449) perpetuates a myth that expansion is not theft or colonialism. Expansion is invoked when recounting how Mexico ceded approximately one million square miles to the US after surrendering militarily. Under a war map the authors pose the question: “To what extent was expansion through war in 1846 a new policy for the US?” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 360–1). The question provokes reflection on the use of war in state-making. But when explaining the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the authors frame it this way: “With victory ensured, U.S. officials faced a difficult decision: How much Mexican territory should they claim?” (363). Such framing is problematic. What about that decision is difficult? In the face of a US-instigated war with Mexico, weren’t there other “difficult decisions” that could be examined?

The authors continue to lack irony in their characterization of immigration in a space of rapidly moving borders. Though the text does mention nativist backlash, much of the focus is on the “surge,” “wave,” and “flood” of migrants (501) who arrive in the US. For Mexicans specifically, “[f]rom 1860 to 1924, some 450,000 Mexicans migrated to the U.S. Southwest ... to jobs on farms, mines, mills, and construction” (502). There is no mention that only by the mid-1800s were Mexican migrants in these places, whereas twelve years prior they would have been residents within their own country.

The California Gold Rush has mostly been a space of silence and absence in representation of Native American, Mexican, and Mexican American people in US history textbooks. Stacy and Ellington in *Fabric of a Nation* handle this content somewhat better.

The rapid influx of gold seekers heightened tensions between newly arrived whites, local American Indians, and Californios. Forty-niners confiscated land owned by Californios, shattered the fragile ecosystem in the California mountains, and forced Mexican and American Indian men to labor for low wages or a promised share in uncertain profits. New conflicts erupted when

migrants from Asia and South American joined the search for wealth. Forty-niners from the US regularly stole from and assaulted these foreign-born competitors. (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 363)

This factual recounting of White violence against Mexican, Californio (people of Mexican ancestry but born in California), and Native American people sets a foundation to look honestly at the complexity of immigration, which this textbook does better than many others to date, while still reinforcing some tropes.

When the authors discuss the “melting pot” they note that it “worked better as an ideal than as a mirror of reality. Immigrants during this period never fully lost the social, cultural, religious, and political identities they had brought with them” (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 508). While the authors note that the role of school is as an important assimilation tool, there is also an underlying implication that immigrants *should* lose their culturally specific identities in order to melt better.

Broadly speaking, the authors use maps about 1910 immigration patterns (571), discussion of pre-1920s immigration restrictions to highlight existing “religious bigotry” (628), and the National Origins Act passed by the 1924 Congress (629) to explain changing immigration rules in a non-fearmongering approach. They note that “immigration from Mexico and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere was exempted from the [1924] quotas because farmers in the Southwest needed Mexican laborers to tend their crops and pressured the government to excuse them from coverage” (629). This exception for Mexicans came with many caveats, which the authors judiciously explain:

In the Southwest and on the West Coast, white people aimed their Americanization efforts at the growing population of Mexican Americans. Subject to segregated education, Mexican Americans were expected to speak English in their classes. Anglo school administrators and teachers generally believed that Mexican Americans were suited only for farm work and manual trades. For Mexican Americans, therefore, Americanization meant vocational training and preparation for low-status, low-wage jobs. (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 629)

This excerpt provides a critique of what Americanization means in the context of discrimination against Mexicans. It also shows how the authors’ definition of White supremacy—the “belief that all white people,

regardless of class or education, were superior to all black people”—was extended to Mexicans (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 328). Moreover, the authors insinuate that class and education are bound together with race and ethnicity in societal notions of superiority and inferiority that dictate social hierarchy.

Fabric of a Nation works to show that Mexicans and im/migrant-origin people stood up to White supremacy, not only through the usual sections on César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, but also through the political party La Raza Unida (Stacy and Ellington 2020: 773–4). They also show White violence as rooted in the glorification of racist pasts, from the colonial costumes and American flags visible in a photograph of school busing opponents in 1970s Boston (762), to Trump’s electoral victory in 2016, rooted in working-class White “attitudes toward minorities and immigrants” (849).

As a critic and analyst, I look for things to critique. *Fabric of a Nation* offers much improvement from earlier textbooks regarding the representation of both Native American and Mexican and im/migrant-origin people. However, that is a low bar to set. The book also continues to normalize White violence and make “expansion” feel necessary rather than a choice to colonize. The book engages person-first language (107), meaning language that centers people’s humanity rather than identifying characteristics of how people are socially categorized, for example, by using the term “enslaved people” rather than “slaves,” which was the more common term in other textbooks in my sample. In doing so, *Fabric of a Nation* demonstrates an interest in resetting dialogue about the past. Yet as a teach-to-the-test textbook, it will remain as limited as the test-makers to whom it caters.

CONCLUSION: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON APUSH

I took APUSH when I was a student at Eureka High School in the late 1990s. I found the class material boring, but the teacher, Paul Bressoud, was a fun, tie-dye-wearing follower of the Grateful Dead who would fill the time between lessons regaling us with deeper life messages: be kind to each other, don’t be so uptight. He cared about his students even as he himself questioned the system that both teachers and students were meant to conform to.

I come from a small town and Mr. Bressoud and I would run into each other over the years, sometimes at the local co-op where he would stock shelves as a side-job. After I finished my Ph.D., when I came to town to

visit my parents over the summer, he bought me a beer to celebrate and we talked about education politics. He had been deeply involved with the teachers' union in his school district and now that he was retired, he was jaded and glad to be away from it.

I've shared a few drafts of my critiques of APUSH curricula over the years with him, including some of the ethnographic work done with students and this textbook analysis. With his permission, I share his thoughts here to frame some of the challenges of courses like APUSH before I return to textual analysis.

I think of my own self, just living in my like-minded zip code thinking I'm cool and not the problem. [Your writing] challenged that thinking. I taught the subject for thirty years and I'm certain I never had the width of inclusivity that really is required to do it right. Though I tried to expand, I was also a product of an even narrower primary and secondary education myself.

Maybe you wanted a more academic response, but what really happened is through your expert telling of a compelling story, one that really resonated with me, you got this old man thinking hard and questioning even himself. I'm thinking about these questions: How do we teach history? Who should be teaching history? Is AP truly a supplement for a college class? Is it a racket? Do students have a say in their curriculum? Do they have an avenue for any grievance? What kind of educational system do you construct when you don't listen to students? If it's unbalanced here in groovy Northern California, then what's it like elsewhere? We need to elect better school board members!

And so on and so forth. My mind was blown on many levels, both with disappointment and introspection. (Bressoud 2022)

Mr. Bressoud's questions are the ones that every teacher and educational administrator needs to be asking themselves. Do students have a say in their curriculum? What does it mean to teach things that have no personal meaning or resonance for students? What are the virtues of a standardized curriculum if it does not inspire learning or, even worse, produces shame and even misinformation in students? Is APUSH just, as he asks, a racket? As we consider the politics of textbooks within the wider lens of educational policy, it is vital to ruminate on these questions. They aren't just the musings of an "old stoner," as Mr. Bressoud calls himself, but questions at the core of many educators' worries as to whether they are using their time in meaningful ways.

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