

Review: Donald Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*.

Richard Hughes

Illinois State University

Donald Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*. New York: Vintage Books, 2022. Pp. 431. \$18.60.

In 1866, a year after the end of the American Civil War, school children encountered a new textbook entitled, *A Youth's History of the Great Civil War in the United States*. Attributing the war to an anti-slavery conspiracy that involved British efforts to undermine American democracy, *A Youth's History* argued that Republicans forced the South to secede despite a harmonious slave society that included benevolent masters and loyal, contented slaves. The authors, John H. Van Evrie and Rushmore G. Horton, were northerners and their book was yet another example of an immense and sustained effort in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to shape a national white identity via a white supremacist historical narrative. In the recently published *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of National Identity*, historian Donald Yacovone examines school textbooks and other historical accounts to argue that "northern white supremacy," rather than slavery, became "the more enduring cultural binding force" that dominated history classrooms until the 1960s (5).

Despite the book's use of John Gast's painting *American Progress* on the cover and brief references to Native Americans and immigration, Yacovone's more narrow focus is a scathing indictment of specific efforts before and after the war, often led by northern elites, to reframe the history of slavery, abolitionism, and Reconstruction around white supremacy. He describes the prolific author Van Evrie as the "nation's first professional racist" and provides ample evidence that northern elites ranging from Horace Mann, Daniel Webster, and Emma Willard in the antebellum period to historians such as Charles Beard, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Henry Steele Commager in the twentieth century perpetuated destructive racist narratives. (43) Together with David S. Muzzey and Thomas Bailey, whose reputable textbooks found their way into the hands of millions of American students throughout the twentieth century, such historians "cauterized the consciousness of most Americans North and South." (15). In aiming to better understand the persistence of white supremacy in American history, Yacovone eviscerates conventional assumptions about racism as a distinctly southern phenomenon and, instead, underscores the foundational role of Northern leaders, educators, and publishers in perpetuating a racist collective memory of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

Textbooks as a gauge for intellectual history are always problematic. Readers will have to reconcile countless studies that suggest students learn very little from textbooks with Yacovone's assumption that such textbooks, starting as early as 1825, were "the perfect vehicle" to promote white supremacy. (xv) Regardless, Yacovone's sweeping account is a compelling instructive window through which to analyze the evolving historiography of race and its place in American education. The book's many examples of white supremacist narratives stemming from places such as Harvard University, New York City publishing firms, and the American Historical Association help students challenge easy assumptions about race, class, and region. In fact, the author, a historian at Harvard, identifies Massachusetts as the "birthplace of Jim Crow and white supremacy" where abolitionists were most often a "despised minority." (25) Yacovone is at his best with the anti-slavery movement, often centered in Boston, as his accessible analysis helps students assess the widely varying interpretations of individuals such as William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Wendell Phillips. *Teaching White Supremacy* contends that northern historians, beginning in the mid nineteenth century, often characterized abolitionists in textbooks as irrational extremists responsible for instigating the costly Civil War. The consequence, according to the author, was generations of

Americans, including many with links to prominent abolitionists, who lamented the history of America slavery while popularizing an American past that left little room for African Americans in the nation's future.

Yacovone's fusion of cultural, intellectual, and educational history holds great potential for teachers in both higher and secondary education. United States history textbooks since the antebellum period provide an illuminating account of an evolving and contested historiography that highlights the nature of the discipline and its important but problematic relationship with collective memory. Preservice teachers can also use *Teaching White Supremacy* to assess textbook narratives, online resources, and state standards. Yacovone's work is especially helpful to secondary teachers as they construct classroom inquiries that ask students to use primary source evidence to corroborate existing narratives of the past. Teachers at any level will find *Teaching White Supremacy* to be a provocative and critical lens through which to navigate the array of assumptions about race and American history that students and adults bring to the classroom.

Moreover, *Teaching White Supremacy* will become required reading for contextualizing the current landscape of the history culture wars. Yacovone highlights the existence of what he refers to as "Emancipationist" textbooks that "repudiated such fantasies of racism and white supremacy." (xix). Yacovone notes that the overwhelming tide of white supremacist historiography in the wake of Reconstruction was never unchallenged as writers such as Hezekiah Butterworth, author of *Young Folks' History of America* (1882), provided counternarratives that recognized the humanity and contributions of African Americans and the importance of slavery in shaping American history. *Teaching White Supremacy* includes brief accounts of African American historians such as Edward A. Johnson and details how the work of authors such as William Cullen Bryant reminded readers that the Civil War was a slaveholder's rebellion ultimately countered by the efforts of African Americans in both the North and South. Such efforts underscore how cultural warfare over the nation's past predated the war and that both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included educational materials that foreshadowed later efforts such the 1619 Project and Teaching Hard History. Ironically, while U.S. history textbooks are often criticized for their focus on American progress, the history of such textbooks, especially in the late nineteenth century as the myth of "The Lost Cause" increasingly became the unquestioned dominant narrative, provide students with a provocative example of the fragile and contested nature of historical interpretation, national identity, and the long and torturous struggle for racial justice.

Author ORCID iD

Richard Hughes  0000-0002-3254-1982