

# Dismantling Curricular Statues: Critically Examining Anti-Black Racism in Representations of Ancient Africa in Canadian Textbooks

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## Article abstract

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# Dismantling Curricular Statues: Critically Examining Anti-Black Racism in Representations of Ancient Africa in Canadian Textbooks

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## Abstract

Although Canada is portrayed as a benevolent multicultural society, the experiences of many of its racialized peoples point to the ongoing realities of racism. Research demonstrates that schools are central to perpetuating racism, in part through a prioritization of white Eurocentric curricula. But how might ancient history curricula specifically contribute to racism? In this article, we interrogate representations of ancient African societies as presented in three secondary school world history textbooks from Quebec and Manitoba and consider the mechanisms of anti-black racism at work. By using Fairclough's (2003) approach to critical discourse analysis, we offer insights about how ancient history curricula do little to address the persistence of anti-black racism. Our analysis finds a continued valorisation of white Western civilizations at the expense of ancient African

histories and Black peoples more generally. Further, we demonstrate how ancient history textbooks perpetuate specific anti-black discourses such as Black primitivity and an overemphasis on Black labour.

*Keywords:* history textbooks, critical discourse analysis, anti-black racism, ancient Africa

### **Résumé**

Bien que le Canada soit décrit comme une société multiculturelle bienveillante, les expériences de ses peuples racialisés révèlent les réalités persistantes du racisme. La recherche démontre que les écoles jouent un rôle central dans la perpétuation du racisme, en partie par la priorisation des programmes d'études eurocentriques blancs. Mais comment les programmes d'histoire ancienne pourraient-ils spécifiquement contribuer au racisme ? Dans cet article, nous interrogeons les représentations des sociétés africaines anciennes telles qu'elles sont présentées dans trois manuels d'histoire mondiale d'écoles secondaires du Québec et du Manitoba, en considérant les mécanismes du racisme anti-noir à l'œuvre. En utilisant l'approche d'analyse critique du discours de Fairclough (2003), nous offrons un aperçu de la façon dont les programmes d'enseignement de l'histoire ancienne contribuent peu à la lutte contre la persistance du racisme anti-noir. Notre analyse révèle une valorisation soutenue des civilisations occidentales blanches au détriment des histoires africaines anciennes, et des peuples noirs de manière générale. En outre, nous démontrons comment les manuels d'histoire ancienne perpétuent des discours anti-noirs spécifiques tels que la primitivité des Noirs et une importance excessive accordée au travail des Noirs.

Mots clés : manuels d'histoire, analyse critique du discours, racisme anti-noir, Afrique ancienne

## Introduction

Montréal, 2020: Protesters pulled down a statue of John A. MacDonald, former Prime Minister of Canada, to call attention to his role in implementing the Indian Residential School system (Rowe, 2020). Winnipeg, 2021: Protesters toppled statues of Queens Victoria and Elizabeth II to highlight Canada's Indigenous genocide and land theft (CBC News, 2021). These are examples of protests where society interrogated the ongoing problems of white supremacy. The conversation is part of a dynamic process of (re)constructing history to help us make sense of our world today. But while physical statues stand as symbols of the racial inequities built into society, as educators we want to ask: What are the equally powerful *figurative* statues—hierarchies and discourses constructed, normalized, and essentialized in school curricula—that need to be problematized and toppled?

Hegemonic discourses, and their representations of history, succeed when they present themselves as the “common sense,” logical, universal ways to see the world, hiding the motives and interests that their historical representations serve (Foster & Crawford, 2006). These discourses and their representations, we argue, are coded within and propagated by what we refer to as “figurative statues.” Through their historical representations, they construct our figurative worlds, including hierarchies that normalize historical and contemporary inequalities and injustices.

While a growing movement seeks to topple physical statues, we argue that figurative statues also need attention. Their power comes from shaping how we view and interpret physical statues, historical representations, social structures, and power dynamics. However, engaging with figurative statues also needs to be accompanied by an awareness of how various statues and hegemonic discourses reinforce each other. As bell hooks reminded us, hegemonic discourses work in mutually reinforcing matrices, such as worldviews informed by a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” which need to be seen as “interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (hooks, as quoted in Jhally et al., 2002, p. 7).

In our view, figurative statues in curricula are as influential as commemorative monuments in shaping understandings of history and the world. Further, they gain significance through their elusiveness, and thus merit analysis and critique. In this article, we consider the role of ancient history representations (before 1400 CE) as figurative statues. How are contemporary power structures legitimized through ancient history representa-

tions in Canadian K–12 social studies curricula? As educator/researchers, we have limited power to topple entire statues by ourselves. The question becomes how to think critically about figurative statues so that curriculum writers, educators, and students can seek to name them, understand their significance, and destabilize them together.

In this article we analyze representations of the ancient histories of African societies, principally through social studies, since it is the subject where educators and curriculum developers are expected to respond to political and social agendas (Marker & Mehlinger, 1992). Given the centrality of textbooks within social studies education (Levstik, 2008), we pay particular attention to studies focusing on textbooks. We examine world history textbooks from the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Manitoba to better understand how African societies are constructed through ancient history narratives. We believe this is a timely discussion in line with anti-racism movements like #BlackLives-Matter, which note that history constructions—or what we refer to as figurative statues—sanction the supremacy of some groups over others, particularly through white privilege, racialized peoples' disadvantage, and Eurocentricity (Hudson, 2017). While a growing acknowledgement problematizes representations of ancient African history in museum spaces through material artifacts (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Gbadamosi, 2020), less has been done to analyze the figurative statues in school curricula and textbooks.

### **Situating the Research**

Given that representations of ancient histories serve political agendas, as is the case with any historical constructions, it is important to situate our work. As educator/researchers, we regularly (re)produce historical narratives in the classroom. Using a critical lens, we aim to deconstruct textbook discourses and to provide constructive practical possibilities. Importantly, while our analysis is grounded in academic readings, our work will always be limited by lived experience, particularly because one of us is white (see Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001).

### **Ehaab's Positionality**

As a cisgendered able-bodied Egyptian male who grew up in Egypt and across North Africa and the Middle East region and who now resides in Canada, my worldview is in-

formed by how history and education is largely affected by a Eurocentric narrative at the expense of acknowledging contributions of non-Western perspectives and epistemologies. However, I am cognizant that my privileged upbringing, mostly Western education, gender, and socio-economic background limit my understandings of many of these issues.

### **Adrienna's Positionality**

I am a white<sup>1</sup> cisgendered able-bodied settler Canadian woman, and my life experiences reflect this privilege. As a practicing K–12 teacher in Manitoba with practical curriculum knowledge, my identity is also shaped by my profession. I lack experiential knowledge of racial oppression myself, which is why I draw heavily on the scholarship of racialized peoples.

### **Context**

We compare the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Manitoba for several reasons. First, our teaching experiences in these two provinces contribute to an analysis grounded in contextual understanding. Second, both Manitoba and Quebec explicitly include ancient history in their curricula for students aged 12–14. Lastly, this comparison exposes commonalities and divergences in educational interpretation, since education is provincially mandated and shaped by diverse provincial policies and curricula across the country.

### **Quebec**

Quebec's history and citizenship education program aims to prepare students as engaged citizens (Ministère de l'Éducation et Enseignement supérieur, 2015). Provincially, approaches to history curricula are informed by both francophone literature, mainly Laville and Martineau, and elements of the Historical Thinking Project (Duquette, 2014; Seixas et al., 2013). While much of the history curriculum is focused on the peoples of Quebec

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1 Following Dumas (2016, pp. 12–13), we have chosen to capitalize the terms “Black” and “Indigenous” because of the self-determination of these groups toward shared kinships and identities. We do not capitalize the term “white” because it is a social construct that “does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13). Since anti-black racism also deals with social constructions of blackness rather than kinships, we have also chosen not to capitalize this term.

and North America (both pre- and post-European contact), during secondary cycle 1, student outcomes cover ancient civilizations in other places (Ministère de l'Éducation et Enseignement supérieur, 2015). Curricular documents list possible ancient civilizations for study, including Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the Nile Valley, China, Greece, Persia, Rome, Europe, Baghdad, Constantinople, and Timbuktu (Ministère de l'Éducation et Enseignement supérieur, 2015).

More broadly, the diversity policy known as *interculturalism* encourages immigrant integration while maintaining the dominant white francophone Québécois culture (McGrane, 2011; Taylor, 2012). Interculturalism manifests throughout Quebec society, including schools, where integration is a clear goal, especially through the prioritization of French language instruction (see Ministère de l'Éducation, 2021). As we will show, interculturalism shapes the figurative statues found in common Québécois textbooks, in part through a prioritization of ancient Western civilizations. However, there have been ongoing demands to make Quebec curricula more inclusive, especially of racialized peoples' perspectives (e.g., Dubé, 2016). An understanding of recent legislation banning religious symbols for public employees helps situate interculturalist policies within ongoing debates in Quebec about racialization and equity, pointing to the urgency of this work (Jiwani, 2017; Sahi, 2019).

## Manitoba

Like Quebec, Manitoba prioritizes citizenship in social studies education; the history curriculum focuses largely on North America (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003). All students in Grade 8 complete a social studies course that covers societies of the past, from the dawn of human existence to 1850 CE (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006). The curriculum is organized into clusters that include: Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Indus Valley; Greece and Rome; medieval Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and China and the Mongol Empire; and European exploration, Renaissance, Reformation, and the industrial revolution (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003). Manitoba recently released general curricular support documents (e.g., Manitoba Education, 2021; Manitoba Education and Training, 2017) to address anti-racism and Black history in the classroom, but these documents do not specifically address ancient histories.

Of particular interest is how Manitoba's interpretation of multiculturalism emphasizes the "equal contribution of all ethnocultural groups to Canadian society" (McGrane, 2011, p. 94). In this discourse, multiculturalism is said to date back to before Manitoba's Confederation, while newcomers are nonetheless expected to adhere to "the 'mainstream' practices of the province that are themselves a product of British cultural heritage" (McGrane, 2011, p. 85). Regardless, Manitoba's multicultural policies do little to address anti-racism concerns. Efforts are primarily focused on "combating racism against Aboriginal peoples," an important area in racial politics in Manitoba, but one kept largely separate from multicultural efforts (McGrane, 2011, p. 96). Critics of Manitoba's current system cite ongoing racial inequities as a frequent oversight (e.g., Braul, 2021). Further, our analysis of a prevalent Manitoba Grade 8 social studies textbook demonstrates the limitations of multicultural inclusion in responding to anti-black racism and the need for more targeted responses.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Our theoretical framework allows us to problematize a Eurocentric approach to ancient history (see Amin, 2009). Specifically, we use the work of Stuart Hall to understand how representations in ancient history textbooks function ideologically by being encoded with constructions of Blackness, Indigeneity, and Otherness through a white gaze (Hall, 1980/2005, 1981/2021, 1992/2018). Hall's scholarship is foundational to understanding how racial constructions permeate societal discourses in relation to power, how race relates to its context in complex ways (see McCarthy et al., 2014), and how discourses function ideologically and often invisibly to construct hierarchies that shape understandings of the world. Hall's work also reminds us of the possibilities of disrupting naturalized discourses by learning to decode their political functions. Other Black scholarship helps relate these discourses to histories of Trans-Atlantic enslavement and contemporary anti-black violences (e.g., Dumas, 2016, 2018; Wilderson, 2017; Wynter, 1994).

In focusing on ancient history, and specifically African societies, we must first problematize the term *civilization*. We see the general deployment of the term in social studies curricula aligning with how Hall (1992/2018) described the ideological discourse of the West: it is a classification, representation, and standard for judgement between groups of people, revealing the workings of power (pp. 143–144). We focus on ancient



Sub-Saharan Africa and concentrate on representations of Blackness, but we cannot separate these representations from other racialization processes. While Black, Indigenous, and other racialized peoples have incommensurable experiences, their oppressions are tied together through the discourse of civilization (Hall, 1992/2018; Wynter, 1994; see also Tuck & Yang, 2018).

*Civilization* is a Western construction that depends on a racial hierarchy shaped from the 1400s onward, when Europeans began enslaving African peoples and sailing across oceans in the name of territorial conquest (Hall, 1992/2018; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wynter, 1994). The concept is demarcated through specific criteria: urbanization, centralized government, an “efficient” division of labour, and a reliance on written forms of communication (e.g., Kahn et al., 2005, pp. 50–51; Laville, 2008, p. 35). Civilization values settled agrarian societies over nomadic societies, venerating monuments and material constructions (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). White European practices occupy the top of this civilizational hierarchy, establishing Western urban organization, government, labour, and communication as superior (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Interestingly, although non-Western civilizations like ancient Egypt are granted marginal respect through key civilizational criteria, elements can be co-opted as predecessors of Western civilization, while not acknowledging these contingent relationships. This is visible in how the West has co-opted the Judeo-Christian tradition, downplaying strong religious influences from other non-Western civilizations, including ancient Egypt (Assmann, 1998).

Non-European groups designated as civilizations are framed as a lesser Other: they help define Western superiority by becoming the contrasting, exotic, but nonetheless inferior foil to Western civilizations (Hall, 1992/2018; Said, 1978). This construction is what Said (1978) termed Orientalism. While an in-depth analysis of Orientalist narratives is beyond the scope of this article, it is helpful to understand that Orientalism manifests through inferiority, exoticism, and threat-based narratives. These narratives can also be mobilized through anti-black racism.

In the Western civilization hierarchy, nomadic societies are positioned toward the bottom because they do not meet the criteria of “settlement” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This construction belittles complex knowledges of land and nature built into Indigenous spiritualities and important to nomadic survival (Stonechild, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Any society that does not build permanent settlements is deemed primitive and irrelevant to modern times, including many Indigenous groups from around the world (Tuhiwai Smith,

2012). An in-depth analysis of Indigenous representations is also beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to recognize the relatedness of Indigenous portrayals within other problematic discourses and to contend with erasures of Indigenous peoples globally, which includes Indigenous peoples also racialized as Black in contexts such as Africa (Dei, 2017).

Based on the work of Black critical scholars, the position of Black peoples in this framework is unique because Blackness is not included in the discourse of civilization, or even that of a human (Dumas, 2016, 2018; Hall, 1992/2018, p. 173). The binary of anti-blackness becomes a separation between the Black and the human, where “the Black cannot be human, is not simply an *Other* but is *other* than human” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13, emphasis in original). Europeans used this construction to justify the commoditization and violent enslavement of Black Africans during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the discourse of anti-blackness continues to position Black peoples as a problem while denying Black humanity (Dumas, 2016, 2018; Wilderson, 2017).

White supremacy utilizes anti-black logics to construct its figurative statues. The exclusion, negation, and objectification of Black peoples’ knowledges, bodies, and lives is mobilized to reinforce white supremacy at the expense of Blackness (Dei, 2017; Dumas, 2016). Anti-blackness dehumanizes Blackness while simultaneously securing white superiority, such as how the Canadian tolerance of blackface enables white-centric revisionist histories (Howard, 2018). This process can also occur by reducing Black peoples to objects by valuing only their labour potential, which has its roots in slavery (Harris, 1993). In the words of Dumas (2016), “slavery is how Black existence is imagined and enacted upon, and how non-Black people – and particularly whites – assert their own freedom, and right to the consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black” (p. 13).

It is interrogating this “consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black” that we prioritize, for it contributes to the ongoing anti-black racism that has life-and-death consequences for Black peoples today (e.g., Dumas, 2016, 2018; Maynard, 2017). We are concerned with how Black peoples and knowledges are overlooked, misrepresented, and reduced to uphold white supremacies and dominate Black lives (Dei, 2017). Too often, generalized approaches to educational equity erase the knowledges and resistance work—as well as ongoing and systemic suffering—of Black peoples (Dumas, 2018), so we approach this analysis with an intentional focus on mechanisms of Black representation and how they contribute to white supremacies, rather than focusing on Eurocentrism alone.

## **Problematic Representations in Western Curricula**

### **Analyzing Textbook Content**

The ways that history is narrated can legitimate and perpetuate inequalities, particularly through encoding racialized discourses (Hall, 1992/2018). History textbooks have been studied around the world, and we highlight examples from the empirical literature that document problematic representations of racialized peoples. For example, Eurocentricity—the prioritization of European knowledges and ideals—remains a common trait amongst history textbooks (Dozono, 2021, 2023; Kim et al., 2013; Marino, 2011a, 2011b; Marino & Bolgatz, 2010; Sheehan, 2010; Van Nieuwenhuysse & Wilke, 2020; Weiner, 2014). Such constructions often mobilize an embedded structure referred to by Bain and Shreiner (2005) as “Western Civilization Plus” (p. 245). This structure normalizes a white progress story, starting with discussions of river valley civilizations, then Greece and Rome, followed by the European Middle Ages, Reformation, and the rise of the nation-state. In this model, while non-European civilizations’ contributions might be included, such inclusion is done “without dramatically shifting the key events or the underlying narrative structure” (Bain & Shreiner, 2005, p. 246).

Work has also been done to explain the omission or misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples in textbooks (e.g., Calderon, 2014; Journell, 2009; Stanton, 2014). Indigenous peoples have often been erased or rendered irrelevant to modern times and lack agency through narratives of primitivity and dispossession (e.g., Carroll, 2019; Schaeffli et al., 2019). Further, the peoples of Northern Africa and Asia are frequently represented through Orientalist constructions that create a nebulous divide between the West and the East (e.g., An, 2016; Sensoy, 2009; Zagumny & Richey, 2012). In this construction, anything non-Western is dichotomized as inferior, less developed/modern, exotic, or threatening.

Blackness has long been represented in ways that both relate to and are incommensurable with representations of other racialized peoples. Reddick’s (1934) analysis of American history textbooks documented gross misrepresentations of slavery constructed to justify the actions of white enslavers. More recently, Woyschner and Schocker (2015) observed that Black women were often portrayed in subordinate roles in US history textbooks. Poole (2012) showed how Black Canadian histories emphasized abolition and the Underground Railroad to maintain white benevolence narratives. Black experiences are

consistently overlooked and misrepresented, from erasures of the Slave Trade (Weiner, 2014), to overly individualistic narratives about racism (Brown & Brown, 2010), to the overreliance of human development narratives that minimize systemic causes of African poverty (Marmer & Ziai, 2015).

While students can and do critique what they learn at school, they do not always possess the background knowledge to articulate alternative narratives (Woodson, 2015). This could lead students to internalize dominant narratives uncritically (Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014). Problematically, students frequently view textbooks as unbiased authorities (Bain, 2006). How textbooks are constructed, then, becomes an important consideration. In contrast, King and Simmons (2018) analyzed three Black history textbooks in Canada and the United States. They showed how careful construction contextualized racialized discourses, accounted for intersectional identities, and emphasized the agency and diversity of Blackness. Changing textbook narratives may serve as chisels to help topple racist curricular statues and construct more balanced alternatives.

### **Why Focus on Ancient History Curricula**

Although numerous studies have analyzed social studies curricula, very few focus on ancient history. Abdou (2017), Marino and Bolgatz (2010), and Marino (2011a, 2011b) problematized constructions of ancient histories in North American curricula, including their representations of the significance and continuity of contributions and intercultural exchanges, which generally reinforce the supremacy of Western civilizations. These studies help elucidate the dominance of a Eurocentric narrative embedded in ancient history curricula, problematizing the normalization of chronologies that reinforce the significance of the white West while sidelining other regions (Marino, 2011b). Beyond these contributions, our literature review uncovered few analyses that looked at ancient histories, with even fewer about ancient African societies. That said, as Charles (2019) demonstrated, ancient history curricula can become a key site of anti-racist resistance and affirmation of Black lives. Thus, in this article we look at ancient history textbooks from two Canadian provinces and how they narrate the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa to better inform our understanding of prevalent discourses.

## Methodology and Methods

This research asked: *How do Quebec and Manitoba world history textbooks represent ancient Sub-Saharan African societies and their contributions? How do these textbooks represent the relationship between these, other non-Western, and ancient Western “civilizations”?* Although admittedly essentializing, we use the shorthand term *non-Western* to refer to societies not originating in Europe (see Hall, 1992/2018). Our work draws on Fairclough’s (2003, 2004) methods for critical discourse analyses, which examines dominant ideologies defined as “representations of aspects of the world that can be shown to contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination, and exploration” (Fairclough, 2004, p. 230), helping us interrogate the potential causal effects of how texts have a role in “inculcating and sustaining ideologies” (Fairclough, 2004, p. 230). Further, a key gap in textual analysis is the lack of cognitive perspectives, which provides insights into the “reading process and characteristics of texts that affect readers’ processing” (Beck & McKeown, 1991, p. 498). Direct consideration elucidates aspects of reader response, including teacher and student interactions with the text. Thus, we provide as much detail as possible about our analytical approaches and consider how educators might (re)produce or challenge dominant narratives with their students.

## Data Sources

We analyzed Quebec and Manitoba textbooks related to the teaching of ancient history in secondary schools, focusing on provincially sanctioned documents. In Quebec, we analyzed the two secondary cycle 1 textbooks approved by Quebec’s ministry: *From Yesterday to Tomorrow* (abbreviated to Q1, Laville, 2008), and *History in Action* (abbreviated to Q2, Lord & Léger, 2008a), and their accompanying guides. Secondary cycle 1 is the main point of entry for students to learn about ancient history, and these recommended textbooks are therefore helpful in elucidating the discourses prevalent in this context. In Manitoba, we analyzed *World History: Societies of the Past* (abbreviated to M1, Kahn et al., 2005) and its teacher guide (McDowell & Mackay, 2006). Grade 8 social studies is the one compulsory curriculum in Manitoba for secondary students to learn ancient histories. While Manitoba prioritizes resource-based learning over a single textbook approach, M1 was tailor-made for this curriculum and is the main textbook recommended by provincial documents (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006, pp. 14, F44).

We examined the following elements for each group under study: characteristics and adjectives attributed; relationships and interactions between groups (Western to non-Western influences and exchanges; non-Western to Western influences and exchanges; how power relationships are articulated); contributions attributed (their significance, materiality, and continuity); quantitative space allocated; and visual representations (illustrations, photographs, captions, and maps). We coded all mentions of the ancient civilizations and their contributions, with a focus on Sub-Saharan African and Western civilizations. Any intergroup exchanges or influences were clearly noted. We also looked at the balance of mentions of material (e.g., trade goods, agricultural produce, raw materials, scientific and technological innovations) and non-material contributions (e.g., advancement of cultural or philosophical ideas, myths, belief systems, and writing). Further, we noted details of visual representations in relation to the text. The Quebec sections began with Abdou's (2017) earlier work with the same texts; expanding this analysis occurred through comparison with the Manitoba documents.

## **Key Findings**

Our analyses revealed similarities between the Quebec and Manitoba contexts. In both, seemingly, the intended curriculum promoted cultural pluralism and inclusion, aligning with local policies of inter- and multiculturalism. However, there were clear discrepancies between these idealistic visions and the textbook content. For instance, while the Quebec curriculum seeks to promote values of pluralism, respect for “cultural diversity,” and a deeper “consciousness of citizenship” (Ministère de l'Éducation et Enseignement supérieur, 2015, p. 298), the representations of non-Western civilizations were generally unbalanced and frequently erased the contributions of ancient African societies. In the Manitoba textbook, while there was inclusivity of non-Western civilizations including Sub-Saharan Africa, the analysis revealed the ongoing problematics of anti-black racism that a multicultural stance failed to address. Under the following two themes we unpack the key findings that emerged.

## Theme 1: Prioritizing the Contributions of Western Civilizations

**Quebec.** The Quebec textbooks offered the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations a disproportionately large number of pages. For instance, Q1 designated approximately 50% of its pages to those two Western civilizations, while it dedicated 8% for ancient African civilizations (Egyptian and Sub-Saharan African). Throughout, the textbooks emphasized the influences of Western civilizations, such as the spread of Greek culture or the Romanization of conquered territories. For example, the Q2 teacher guide encouraged teachers to help students explore “the unprecedented expansion of the Roman territory... recognizing the influence this expansion had on the way of life of conquered peoples” (Lord & Léger, 2008b, p. 125; see also Abdou, 2017). In contrast, there was a lack of discussion of non-Western influences on ancient Greece and Rome, such as the literature of ancient Egypt (Rutherford, 2016) and the philosophies of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia (Anakuwe, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Further, the Quebec textbooks emphasized the continuity of ancient Western influences on modern societies. The textbooks clearly sought for students to appreciate ancient Greco-Roman influences on today’s world. For instance, Q1 presented three full pages of photographs of Roman ruins, encouraging students to notice Rome’s influence on modern buildings (pp. 176–178). Further, the textbook offered photos of modern buildings inspired by ancient Greece (pp. 124–125). Q2 also explained that “architects throughout history have been inspired by the design and architecture of Greek temples” (p. 97).

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2 Through an in-depth engagement with the works of other scholars, Anakuwe (2017) demonstrates how ancient Egypt—as part of ancient Africa—had a sophisticated philosophical system that “was replete with aphorisms, allusions, metaphors, negative or positive methods, and dialectics that demonstrated the speculative reflective ability of the people” (Anakuwe, 2017, p. 173). Anakuwe (2017) reminds us of the prolonged exchanges between ancient Egyptians and ancient Greeks, and how “some ideas already present in the cosmologies of Greece possessed a striking semblance to the prior Egyptian system. One notable idea was the expediency of balance between right and wrong in the life of an individual, which led to the prevention of chaos and anarchy” (p. 176). Importantly, more balanced curricular representations of these exchanges and influences require challenging and dismantling the powerful “figurative statues” that continue to propagate that “philosophy” was a novel achievement and contribution, solely to be attributed to ancient Greece and Rome. For those interested in further exploration of these exchanges and influences, see some of the arguments made by: Russell, B. (1996). *History of Western Philosophy*. Routledge; Obenga, T. (2004). Egypt: Ancient history of African philosophy. In K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (pp. 31–49). Blackwell Publishers; and, Nasser, M. (2019). *The Path to the New Hermetopolis: The History, Philosophy, and Future of the City of Hermes*. Rubedo Press.

Finally, Q2's teacher guide encouraged teachers to relay how ancient Greece's legacy "is the foundation of modern democratic society" (Lord & Léger, 2008b, p. 90). No comparable references were made to any non-Western group's continued influences (see also Abdou, 2017).

**Manitoba.** The Manitoba Grade 8 curriculum also prioritized Western contributions, in part through its emphasis on ancient Greece and Rome, but this emphasis was not as pronounced as in Quebec (see Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006, p. 43). In the M1 textbook, ancient Western civilizations (Greece and Rome) occupied approximately 15% of the entire text, whereas ancient African civilizations (Egypt, Ghana, and Mali) occupied approximately 10%. Nonetheless, our analysis indicated that M1 positioned Western civilizations as net influencers by emphasizing their non-material examples over material/trade goods. For example, the textbook highlighted ancient Greek contributions such as architecture, tragedy/comedy story structures, language, and ideas, including "the ways we study history, philosophy, and medicine; the idea of democracy; [and] some of the music we listen to have their roots in ancient Greece" (p. 143). In contrast, although the textbook referenced ancient Malian and Ghanaian scholarship and a unique architectural style, the listed contributions were generally more material: trade routes, weapons, blacksmithing, gold mining, and farming implements (p. 191).

Notably, there were frequent mentions of trade relationships throughout M1 that mitigated a unidirectional understanding of Western civilization influences. The text reiterated how trade facilitated the spread of non-material ideas. However, in quantifying the many examples, it became clear that material mentions of non-Western civilizations still outweighed their nonmaterial contributions differently than for their Western counterparts. Nonetheless, the M1 authors positioned non-Western civilizations differently than Q1 or Q2 since their inclusion was more expansive and less unidirectional.

The M1 textbook highlighted the importance of Greece and Rome through word choices such as "greatly impacted" (p. 143) and "strongly influenced" (p. 171). The authors of M1 also emphasized two-way relationships, for example: "In addition to goods, trade allowed for the exchange of ideas. Eastern design, art, and literature influenced Roman culture. In turn, Roman innovations in industry and construction were adopted by other cultures" (p. 157). However, while it was clear in the text that other ancient civilizations influenced Western civilizations, these statements were often generic, such as: "The Romans absorbed many of the customs and traditions of the peoples they conquered" (p. 171). This lack of specificity de-emphasized non-Western contributions somewhat.



Significantly, in M1 we identified multiple attempts embedded within the text to mitigate Western bias. The authors explained *why* some societies are more prominently understood, which helped highlight the constructed narratives and offered an implicit invitation to start problematizing them. Multiple references were made, such as: “Few written records were preserved or have been found from Africa or the Americas. As a result, we know much less about peoples who lived in Africa and the Americas than we do of peoples from ancient Greece and Rome” (p. 174). These statements reminded readers that history is constructed from available evidence. There were also statements contextualizing the limitations of historical narratives. One such example appeared in the introduction: “History can create a false version of the past. This can be done intentionally to instill distrust and hatred among people in the present. It may also be done because our interpretations of historical events are based on evidence, and evidence often changes” (p. 9). These statements made the constructed and political nature of historical narratives more explicit.

## **Theme 2: Articulating Influences of Ancient Sub-Saharan Africa through Anti-Black Racism**

*Quebec.* The Quebec textbooks presented ancient non-Western civilizations’ contributions as mostly material or negligible. Within that limited coverage, Africa was predominantly portrayed as a primitive land, largely uninhabited by humans, and serving mainly as a source of raw materials and peoples for labour. For instance, Q1 explained how European and other merchants traded “fabrics and manufactured goods” in return for African gold, ivory, and enslaved peoples (p. 272). Timbuktu was the only example of a Sub-Saharan African civilization; however, there was no elaboration on its contributions. Q1 made only a passing reference to how trade gave rise to several other “great African kingdoms” (p. 270). Q1 dedicated approximately 3% of its text to ancient Sub-Saharan Africa. Except for a brief mention of Timbuktu as a trade hub for gold, ivory, salt, and enslaved peoples (p. 219), Q2 was especially silent on any Sub-Saharan African contributions, with only 0.5% of the entire text dedicated to ancient Timbuktu. The erasures of Black histories, as well as an overemphasis on African natural resources and the enslavement of Black peoples, minimized Black intellectual contributions and limited Black peoples to physical labour.

No mention of the non-material influences of African civilizations was included. The separation between ancient Afro-Asiatic and Western civilizations was reinforced by abrupt transitions and the omission of historically significant turning points. For example, both Q1 and Q2 textbooks went from discussing ancient Mesopotamia to ancient Greece, bypassing ancient Egypt altogether. While ancient Egypt, chronologically speaking, would have built on ancient Mesopotamian influences and in turn influenced ancient Greece, Q2 totally omitted ancient Egypt. Q1 presented Egypt as a net borrower civilization that offered few intercultural influences, emphasizing how much it borrowed from ancient Mesopotamia and making claims that Egypt did not “spread its culture very widely” (p. 62). Sub-Saharan African influences were not even mentioned (see also Abdou, 2017).

Generally, the two textbooks had a disproportionately small number of images dedicated to Sub-Saharan African civilizations: for Q1, 10 of the total 325 images related to Africa, while for Q2 it was only 1 of 144 images. Problematically, these images reinforced constructions of primitivity and exoticism associated with non-Western knowledges. For example, the section on Timbuktu included a photograph of young Black African men dancing traditionally while wearing ceremonial dress (p. 271). In an example about dwindling nomadic traditions, there was a photograph of the “Bushmen of the Kalahari” set with a background of the desert (p. 9). Considering the overall narrative, these photographs and captions did little to address discourses that accentuate the differences between a stereotypical undeveloped Africa and a more “modern” West (see Hall, 1992/2018).

**Manitoba.** The Manitoba Grade 8 curriculum listed the ancient African civilizations of Mali and Ghana as an optional topic in cluster 4 (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006, pp. F21, F37, F49, G12). However, M1 included a full chapter on Mali and Ghana, which helped us infer that the textbook authors prioritized the inclusion of Sub-Saharan African civilizations. This decision is a positive move toward decentring the Eurocentricity that permeates much of history instruction.

The chapter on ancient Ghana and Mali linked to Grade 8 curricular outcomes because it included examples of how Islamic influences spread peacefully across geographies (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006, p. 49). The writers contextualized Islam as an influential religion that expanded through western Africa, in part because of its trade interactions, for example: “Constant exposure to Arab culture and to Islam brought many changes in the traditional culture of western Africa” (M1, p. 184).

Looking at the overall textbook, this chapter was important, since it introduced Islam as a major religion and was the sole chapter about a Black civilization.

Thinking further about anti-black racism however, M1 still had problems. Interestingly, although the text was written about an ancient civilization, this chapter included four photographs of contemporary Black West Africans (pp. 182, 186, 187), whereas all photographs about Western civilizations were limited to scenery and objects. This move positioned Black West Africans as ancient history themselves. The three photographs and captions on pp. 186–187 were particularly problematic when considering the dehumanization of anti-black racism and its foundations in the Slave Trade. The photographs showed Black men working in a gold mine (p. 186), making bricks using an ancient technique (p. 187), and carrying a cotton bale (p. 187). The photographs and captions reinforced the stereotype of a poorly developed Africa, relying on centuries-old techniques rather than more modern technologies. There was no contextualization to explain the continued use of these technologies. Further, these photographs directly associated Black peoples with physical labour. Although the photos were inclusive of Black Africans, they nonetheless perpetuated problematic anti-black narratives through their construction.

## Discussion

In both Quebec and Manitoba documents, a reliance on the civilizational hierarchy clearly differentiates ancient Western from non-Western (especially African) societies, representing the former as the epitome of civilization. These textbooks achieve this narrative through what Fairclough (2003) would refer to as both a subtle and explicit “classification,” where the text determines “entities being either differentiated from one another, put in opposition to one another, or being set up as equivalent to one another” (p. 88; see also Hall, 1992/2018, pp. 142–143). Analyzing such constructions gains urgency and significance because such “classification and categorization shape how people think and act as social agents” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 88).

Thus, we can claim that in these textbooks, African societies were negated and excluded to different degrees, albeit by employing different discursive strategies. In the context of Quebec, arguably, the textbook narrative represented a form of exclusion that Fairclough (2003) would refer to as “suppression”: there was very little mention or lack of textual representation altogether. Alternatively, the case of Manitoba would demons-

trate a degree of “generic” inclusion, particularly in its lack of specificity about non-Western civilizational influences beyond the material (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 145–146), where increased specificity was visible in the chapter on Ghana and Mali, but without critical consideration of anti-black racism.

Regarding representations of exchanges and influences, non-material contributions of African societies seemed to be generally undervalued, if not altogether omitted, particularly in Q1 and Q2. Perhaps such negation of non-material contributions and thought systems, which render them as primitive, are indicative of the lack of ability to appreciate different knowledge systems, which is prevalent among dominant elites in many Western societies. Connell (2007) reminds us that, “Europeans failed to see the well-developed implicit philosophy that Africans already possessed” (pp. 97–98). Although arguably, primary sources for ancient history research might skew in favour of Western civilizations, M1 was able to mitigate this issue somewhat because of its explicit naming of the imbalance in its metanarrative, along with a more conscious effort to point out contributions of non-Western societies than was evidenced in Q1 or Q2. However, as Hampton (2019) reminds us, visual inclusion in itself is not sufficient to contend with the deeper politics of racism.

Further, our evidence suggested the naturalization of anti-black racism in how sub-Saharan African societies were portrayed. In glossing over Black knowledge contributions and portraying Black peoples frequently as physical labourers, these texts assigned Black peoples a subservient role that also reinforces what Hartman (1997) called the “fungibility” of Black peoples’ bodies. To Hartman (1997), fungibility encompasses the violence and commoditization of enslaved labour, but also the ways that enslavement dominates and controls Black lives. These relations of domination continue to impact power relations, with material consequences for Black peoples such as police violence and school pushouts (e.g., Maynard, 2017). The symbolic power of such portrayals of Blackness—that limit the agency, modernity, and capacity of Black peoples—helps perpetuate anti-black racism by normalizing such power relations (e.g., Brown & Brown, 2010; see also Hall, 1992/2018).

## Discursive Strategies that Reinforce and Legitimize Constructed Hierarchies

Much of the discussion points to implicit or “assumed evaluation,” which would include evaluative statements of particular events or groups “often much more deeply embedded in texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 172). Such a constructed hierarchy is achieved and legitimized in these textbooks through several discursive strategies. First, in essentializing *civilization* and what such a definition entails, these representations negate societies that do not conform to the key elements that Western society has determined to qualify within this hierarchy.

Second, as for the societies still included in the hierarchy (such as those that are settled and agrarian), there are other strategies that continue the classification. By emphasizing both material and non-material contributions, value is attributed implicitly to some groups over others, and they are represented as worthy of higher positions, as is the case of Western civilizations. Their contributions maintain their significance and relevance in comparison to non-Western societies. Thus, an emphasis on material and non-material contributions, their continuity, and their relevance clearly serves this discursive purpose.

Third, such a hierarchy is legitimized by the narrative arc that these textbooks adopted, which “develops” toward the supposedly more advanced and sophisticated Western “modernity” (e.g., Bain & Shreiner, 2005). This narrative subtly paints ancient non-Western societies and peoples as less evolved and primitive (see also Dozono, 2021, 2023). Such an approach solidifies when students know very little about such racialized groups’ modern contributions to society, given the general silence vis-à-vis these groups and their contributions (Journell, 2009).

Importantly, the discourses about ancient civilizations included multiple examples of anti-black racism. This is not surprising, given the prevalence of anti-black racism in Canada (e.g., Howard, 2023; Maynard, 2017; Poole, 2012). While the examples in Quebec’s textbooks either erased or minimized Sub-Saharan African civilizations, Manitoba’s textbook mitigated Black erasures somewhat through its inclusion of ancient Mali and Ghana. These findings relate to the nuances of diversity policies in Quebec and Manitoba. In the Quebec textbooks, interculturalism was visible through an explicit privileging of Western civilizations, which paralleled the white francophone narratives woven throughout the dominant Quebec political agenda. In Manitoba, the textbook showed evidence

of multicultural thinking through its intentional inclusions of non-Western civilizations. However, our experiences as educators make us suspect that even with deliberate textbook inclusion, many teachers may skip over the chapter in their teaching, since the provincial curriculum makes this content optional. More research is needed to understand the ways these texts are engaged with in classrooms. Our findings also demonstrate the urgency of deliberate critical engagement with productions of anti-black racism beyond multicultural inclusion alone. Otherwise, anti-blackness remains unchallenged in the curricular statues constructed, normalized, and legitimized by multiculturalism.

Further, we want to problematize the prevalence of African primitivity narratives and the overemphasis on Black labour demonstrated in each textbook. These narratives reinforce the anti-black notion that Blackness is outside of human consideration, rendering Black peoples as irrelevant to modernity and only valuable if completing physical tasks (Dumas, 2016). Anti-black racism feeds on this construction, devaluing Black life and agency. Critical educators must actively problematize anti-black constructions in their work, in part by teaching students to analyze textbooks as they read them. Comparing the photographs used in different chapters of a textbook, for example, could generate discussion about anti-black racism, primitivism, Orientalism, erasures, and white supremacy, highlighting the problematic curricular statues that remain intact in these framings. Such critique would also reinforce skills such as evaluating research resources.

Thinking about the biases present in all historical constructions, the textbook narratives rarely represented the multiplicity of perspectives vis-à-vis the past and present realities of racialized global power relationships. The Quebec textbooks seemed to generally embody what VanSledright (2008) problematized as an “authorial voice” (p. 115): there was little discussion of biases woven into the narratives themselves, and no acknowledgement of the constructed nature of history in the texts. The Manitoba textbook M1 was more transparent, particularly in contextualizing why some societies had more historical evidence available for analysis. Examining texts for authorial voice could engage students in critical processes. After all, as Fairclough (2003) reminds us, dominant ideologies achieve their hegemony through seeking to “universalize particular meanings in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance” (p. 58).

As educators, we believe historical conversations need to be informed by the active problematization of the concept of civilization. If left unchallenged, this constructed statue will continue to both explicitly and subtly reinforce the white supremacy of Euro-

centricity. Critical engagement would help clarify the existing racial hierarchy, equipping students to better recognize and value various ways of being, knowing, and contributing to humanity. Educators might consider altogether different frameworks, such as Indigenous scholar Blair Stonechild's (2020) "ecolizations," a construction that also values contributions of nomadic societies. Using this alternative paradigm would allow educators, students, and curriculum developers to rethink an exclusionary construct.

### Concluding Remarks

Whether deliberately or unconsciously, textbooks construct social hierarchies—or what we refer to as curricular statues—that shape worldviews and attitudes. Textbook writers should consider cultural representations carefully but need to move beyond thin or additive cultural inclusion as the only response to diversity. To that end, we call for curriculum and textbook writers to attend directly to anti-racist perspectives that reframe Blackness through its complexities and to emphasize the ongoing agency of Black communities around the globe, past and present, while making this priority explicit in their writing (e.g., Dei, 2017; King & Simmons, 2018). Texts would benefit from considering multiple perspectives throughout, and students who engage with the texts should be encouraged to do the same (DesRoches, 2016). This way students can be exposed not only to “the entanglements of mutual indebtedness” but also “the subtleties of exchange within an unequal relation of power” (DesRoches, 2016, p. 255). We agree with Woodson (2015), who recommended teachers regularly ask questions such as: “*What perspectives are present?*, *What perspectives are absent?*, and *What interests are served by the perspectives shared?*” (p. 63, emphasis in original). These discussions are crucial to promoting critical analysis skills among teachers and students and making transparent the implicit biases grounding historical interpretations.

We recommend that educators prioritize an analysis of inherent biases by critiquing problematic texts, but also that textbook and curriculum writers prioritize meta-reflection in their writing. In textbooks, this means highlighting their constructed nature by mobilizing text features such as headings, bolded text, reflection questions, colour, and illustrations so that students and educators alike notice their significance more readily. Teacher's guides should include specific activities for deconstructive analysis with students. Further, teachers should seek to equip students with such transferable skills to

help them decipher dominant discourses encountered through extracurricular sources, including social media.

By grappling with the constructions embedded in ancient history narrations, educators, writers, and students can explore history as a complex discipline relevant today. As we have shown, constructions embedded in Canadian ancient history textbooks currently act as pedestals that privilege Western civilizations while perpetuating harms, such as anti-black racism. Although new constructions can help bring more balanced understandings about the world, building inter- and multicultural statues through curricula does not automatically dismantle the oppressive statues of white supremacist histories that are embedded within. The most effective chisels directly counteract racisms and non-Western erasures through critical engagement with the constructions themselves. We see this process of (re)constructing history in relation to our current context as the most effective way to foster students' critical historical thinking skills while contending with the ongoing injustices in our world today.

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