

## Representing African-American Women in U.S. History Textbooks

*This article addresses the dearth of African American women in high school US history textbooks. The authors conducted a content analysis of the images in the only existing African American history textbook on the market and found that Black women are under-represented. They employ Rachel Mattson's five heuristics to show how to incorporate images of Black women in more meaningful ways in the curriculum: sourcing, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame, intertextuality, framing historical questions, and using visual codes and conventions.*

Research has well established the fact that women are significantly underrepresented in the text and images in high school US history textbooks. Several studies over the last three decades have analyzed women in mainstream texts and have concluded that a handful of women are repeatedly included, and the women portrayed are generally on the conservative end of the political spectrum. These analyses conclude that Black women are virtually absent from mainstream high school US history texts, which is consonant with other studies on diversity in textbooks.<sup>1</sup>

In this article we focus exclusively on the dearth of African-American women in textbooks and examine whether they are more widely represented in the only Black high school history textbook on the market.<sup>2</sup> Then, we use these findings to consider and include African-American women in the social studies curriculum. We conducted a content analysis of the images in the Black history textbook to see whether or not women were similarly under-represented in a text dedicated to the history of a minority group. Finally, we compared our findings to the data on women in mainstream US history textbooks. The data below indicate that

Black women are not represented by a greater percentage in the African American history textbook than they are in mainstream American History textbooks.

By focusing solely on images we accomplish two goals. First, the research has shown that women are a greater proportion of images than they are the text, so by isolating one variable we are able to study the more abundant source of women in textbooks.<sup>3</sup> Second, examining images affords us the opportunity to add to the conversation on inclusivity of women by investigating *how* women are portrayed in the African American history textbook. Recent studies have begun to address art and images in teaching history as well as how women are represented in the social studies curriculum.<sup>4</sup> After presenting an overview of our findings, we consider how images of Black women could strengthen the social studies curriculum by drawing on five heuristics outlined by the education researcher Rachel Mattson. We showcase strategies to help classroom teachers and curriculum specialists effectively integrate images of women of color using images obtained through the Library of Congress online archives.

### **Images of African-American Women**

Since studies of women in US history textbooks have been widely covered, we conducted a content analysis of the only high school African American history textbook produced by a major publisher that is currently in print. We counted how often women and men were portrayed in the images and compared our data from the African American history textbook with the findings on mainstream US history textbooks in how often women are pictured. For the comparison, we counted the number of women by randomly choosing two mainstream US history textbooks that appear in other content analyses. Second, we conducted an exploratory analysis of how Black women are portrayed. For example, are the women upper class or lower class, famous or not, with their men or independent? Are the images photographs, paintings,

portraits, or allegorical figures? Do the images of women depict a wide variety of experiences of women in history? To what extent do the images depict stereotypes?

Table 1 reveals the raw numbers of Black and White women, as well as a count of the men, in the textbook *African American History* as compared to the two mainstream texts we chose.<sup>5</sup> We found the African American history textbook had the same issues the mainstream US history textbooks have with the imbalance in images of women and men. However, we were surprised to learn that the percentage of women to men in the Black history text was much smaller than that of the two mainstream texts. Women are found in only 14.4 percent of the images in *African American History*, while they make up 44.6 percent and 34.1 percent respectively of the images in the two mainstream texts we analyzed: *The Americans* (1998) and *America: Pathways to the Present* (1998). This finding challenges our assumption that a text that places race at the center of its narrative would also do the same with gender.

Table 1: Raw Numbers of Black Women, White Women, and Men

Book Title	Total Number of Women	Number of Black Women	Number of White Women	Number of Men
<i>African American History</i>	156	132	24	926
<i>The Americans</i>	306*	53	232	686
<i>America: Pathways to the Present</i>	238*	50	157	682

\*Figures include all women in the textbooks (e.g., Black, White, Latina, Asian, American Indian, etc.) except group images, which were impossible to accurately count. The Black history textbook did not include any images of women who were not identifiable as Black or White with the exception of two group pictures where races were not identifiable.

Our findings do indicate, however, that more images of Black women are available than are used in the mainstream American History textbooks when one looks solely at raw numbers.

There are more than twice the number of Black women pictured in *African American History* than in the two mainstream texts. Since we do not believe that raw numbers can tell the complete story, we then explored how the textbook images portrayed women.

### **Portrayal of Women**

In the second phase of our analysis we explored how Black women are portrayed in the African American textbook as compared to the mainstream American history texts. In the Black history text, the pictures showed a broader spectrum of the experiences of Black women than the mainstream American history texts. In the mainstream American history texts, the majority of the Black women pictured are shown as slaves or as leaders of movements rising up against slavery. While *African American History* includes pictures of female slaves, it also has images of female artists, business owners, and politicians. Moreover, the pictures of enslaved women are more explicit than in the mainstream American history books; instead of the stereotypical images of slaves working fields, this textbook includes images of families being torn apart. This has a more humanizing effect, invoking emotion that is difficult to teach and discuss without images. There is rich power in these teaching opportunities, something that is missing from the average US history textbook.

The Black history textbook, despite showing more overall images of Black women than the mainstream US history textbooks (see Table 1 above), still does not provide enough variety of images to supplement the curriculum. We argue that a more varied representation of Black women in all American History textbooks is essential for the images to be a powerful teaching tool. We now turn to how images can be identified and used by teachers to provide a deeper foundation from which to plan educational experiences.

### **Representing Black Women in US History**

In light of our findings, we do not wish to make the case to just add more women. From the past several decades of research on gender in the social studies, we understand that this is not the only way to remedy the dearth of women of color in the history curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we are not going to introduce a series of famous Black women to supplement the text, because we wish to move beyond contribution history. Instead, we focus on interpreting images and drawing on other fields to enhance the social studies curriculum. For example, media literacy studies have indicated the power of images in developing understanding.<sup>7</sup> Also, images hold the potential to help students tap into higher order thinking skills, such as cultivating empathy, emphasizing a historical concept, or encouraging students to consider alternative perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Finally, given that digitized sources are readily available through such sites as the Library of Congress, enriching the social studies curriculum with women of color is easier now than it has ever been.

We turn to one scholar's proposal for helping both students and scholars **infer meaning from** images. Rachel Mattson presents five "tactical heuristics," or "interpretive devices" which can be used in **construing the meaning of historical images**, which involves a different approach than decoding and interpreting text. These five heuristics are sourcing, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame, intertextuality, framing historical questions, and using visual codes and conventions. **As we proceed, it is important to remember that this type of undertaking, like traditional historical analysis, is interpretive and does not always conclude with students finding the one correct answer. The research shows that this type of investigation is useful also for revealing what students already know and for helping them use context knowledge to interpret historical sources, whether text or image.**<sup>9</sup> **In what follows, we** apply each **heuristic** in turn with images of

Black women in an effort to suggest the myriad possibilities that lay in such innovative approaches.

First, sourcing asks the viewer to read a document and interpret it. We begin with the image of Johanna Lesley, a former enslaved woman, in a 1937 photograph (see Image 1, titled “Johanna Lesley, ex-slave, Bracketville”).<sup>10</sup> In the case of images and photographs, students should consider who created the image and why. Who took the picture? What ideas or thoughts did the photographer wish to convey? One might also ask how trustworthy this source might be. In other words, is it authentic or constructed to convey a political stance or cultivate an emotional response? We like that the image of Lesley shows a strong and confident woman. While slavery is a central part of most mainstream US history texts, this image from the Southern Writers’ Project has the potential to teach students not only about those who lived under extreme oppression, but of the process of recalling and recording the past (see our discussion of the third heuristic, below, for more information on historical memory).

Second, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame has students looking both at the production of the image and the image itself. The goal is to get students to slow down the viewing process. We use the example from the topic of African American women’s labor. Most textbooks do not include images of the nuanced and varied experiences of working women, and often assumptions are based on a White, middle class understanding that women did not work outside the home. However, Black women have been employed in waged labor for a very long time in this country. They have worked in manual labor, as domestics, and in factories. They also have been business owners, teachers, and community leaders.<sup>11</sup>

The next two images (Image 2 is titled “African Americans, mostly women, assorting tobacco at the TB Williams Tobacco Co., Richmond, Virginia” and Image 3 is titled “Cutting

and Fitting”) are of Black women in the late nineteenth century. In the first image, they are sorting tobacco at the T.B. Williams Tobacco Company in Richmond, Virginia (1899). In the next photograph, women students at Agricultural and Mechanical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, are shown cutting and fitting clothing in class (1899). Students should be asked to look closely at the photographs to describe what they see inside the frame. What images, objects, or people are portrayed? What historical events are depicted? The idea is to spend some time looking at the image and describing what appears in the composition.<sup>12</sup> Students could be asked to work individually to identify details of the images before discussing with a partner or small group to thoroughly compile details. After this process, the students will be equipped with a comprehensive familiarity of the image and prepared for the second phase of this step.

Then, looking outside the frame, the students should find the title of the work. What other information can be gleaned about the image, its creator, or the time period? After an investigation of the image details, the students will be prepared to seek answers to these questions, drawing upon historical knowledge of the time period. Further, this is an opportunity for students to become historians, conducting research to answer questions they ask based on the content inside the frame. For example, students could be asked to make inferences about who these women are, where they might be working, and what purpose they serve. Moreover, showing images of productive African Americans can be interpreted as a positive portrayal, but a more subtle interpretation is that young, Black women were prepared for a life of subservience through manual labor, and were often discouraged from traditional academic achievement in school. Nonetheless, Black women often were the primary wage earners in their households, so waged labor helped them sustain their families.<sup>13</sup>

Third, intertextuality refers to reading texts and images together to develop context understanding as well as content understanding of a time period and/or event. As Mattson explains, students should “read written sources that relate to the material contained within and outside the frame of the image.”<sup>14</sup> For this heuristic, we return to the first image of Johanna Lesley to ponder it alongside written testimony to bring forth a deeper, fuller understanding of the meaning of the image. In particular students can investigate the Works Progress Administration’s project to collect oral histories of the freed people. The narratives were collected as part of the Southern Writers’ Project (SWP) from 1936 to 1938. The oral histories are available—both as text and sound recordings—on the Library of Congress’ website. There are more than two thousand interviews catalogued and thorough scholarly yet accessible explanations of the effort and the time period can be found on the website as well.<sup>15</sup> The oral histories are reflections on life as a slave, but also raise questions about interviewing and historical memory. After exploring the narratives, students can discuss the power of combining texts and images to tell a more complete story of the past. Students will not only gain more information about this specific topic, but will learn to seek a variety of images in the future where only text is available, and vice-versa.

The fourth heuristic, context, refers to viewing the ideas portrayed in an image as part of larger contexts of historical questions and debates. For this next heuristic we focus on women’s efforts during World War II. Therefore, we selected two photographs of Black women WAACs, or members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. While students may be familiar with Rosie the Riveter, many might not realize that Black women were integral to the war efforts and worked on behalf of the Allied cause even though they did not have political and social equality in the United States. Black women were recruited for jobs in shipyards and airplane factories; in



fact, the percentage of Black women in the workforce increased from seven to eighteen percent in the period 1940-1944.

Students could be shown the first image (Image 4, titled “WAACs off for Fort Clark”) and asked to guess who the women are and what they are doing. After going around the room asking students to offer visual observations, then they could make guesses and inferences. This whole-group strategy is a way for the class to have a large discussion that is guided and productive, including all students in the room. Most students probably would guess that the image takes place in the United States, during World War II. When that information is revealed, it could serve as a springboard to learn about Black women’s efforts during the war. The women in Image 4 are seated in the back of an army truck, about to make the journey from the WAAC training center at Fort DesMoines, Iowa, to Fort Clark in Texas. Image 5 (titled “African American women climbing into Army truck, probably WAACs about to begin training”) shows women climbing into the back of an Army truck, circa 1943 to 1945, and the Library of Congress caption explains that they are probably about to begin training. Why are the women in both images smiling? Students could consider why Black women were enlisting in the WAACs. Why would they fight for a country which did not give them full political and legal rights? To further develop an understanding of context, students can access the personal papers of the women in Image 4.<sup>16</sup> These difficult questions could be explored during the whole group discussion, but would be an excellent opportunity for student independent or cooperative study. These types of questions require a deeper understanding of historical context and human nature. Asking students to take the perspectives of these women to tell their stories in a dramatic role play, for example, would require higher levels of critical thinking.

Finally, Mattson argues that teachers need to encourage creativity in students by helping them take risks in interpreting visual codes and conventions of artwork. We use images from the Civil Rights Movement to illustrate her point about using the visual codes and conventions of artists in teaching history. Image 6 (titled “Troops block Negro students at school”) is a well-known image of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the “Little Rock Nine,” integrating Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. In spite of the popularity of this image, it does not show up in mainstream US history textbooks. Therefore, many students will not be exposed to this image unless their teachers supplement the standard curriculum.<sup>17</sup>

We suggest that teachers start teaching with this photograph by spending a substantial amount of time looking closely at it. There is much nuanced detail in this image that requires a discerning analysis. Students could be prompted to notice the stature and posture of Elizabeth, or to make inferences about what her eyes may look like behind her sunglasses. Students could be asked what the White woman in the background is doing, and then probed to ask why she is screaming. Through a series of well-planned and scaffolded questions based on the academic and experience levels of a particular group of students, teachers could guide a class through a discussion of perspective taking. For example, How do you think the Black woman is maintaining her composure? What may have happened leading up to this day? Who is the White woman and why is she angry? Students could be asked to imagine the women switching places.<sup>18</sup> How would the scene change if the woman walking into the school were White, and the protestor Black?

Mattson gives the example of juxtapositions as used by artists as a narrative method for their work. She asks, “What kinds of creative methods, ideas, and notions does the artist deploy?”<sup>19</sup> Interpreting or creating juxtapositions models disciplinary analysis for students and

invites them to demonstrate their understanding.<sup>20</sup> In other words, when students create or interpret juxtapositions they are imitating the real work of historians and museum curators. We juxtapose the image of Eckford with other images of women in the Civil Rights Movement. See Image 7, taken on the same day, which shows the danger and gravity of the situation with the students' transportation to Central High School in a United States Army vehicle. Image 8 depicts Vivian Malone entering Foster Auditorium to register for classes at the University of Alabama. Malone and Eckford can be compared, and their experiences juxtaposed, to facilitate an understanding of the hard lines that had to be crossed, both figuratively and literally, by women during the Civil Rights Movement.

After looking closely at and juxtaposing these images, students could be asked to write an inner dialogue of thoughts Eckford and Malone may have had while taking their famous walks. Students could conduct additional research about the life experiences of Malone and Eckford and ultimately determine how the different experiences of individuals, past or present, impact their experiences and perceptions of the same world events.

In Image 8, students could note the photographers and make comparisons to press coverage in the present day when major events are taking place. Students could be asked to write a "current events article" to accompany the image after discussing and analyzing its meaning. For a more advanced project, students could create a movie documentary about the experiences of women during the Civil Rights Movement, using images and documents. Overall, however, the juxtapositions highlight the efforts of young women in the fight for equality.

## **Conclusion**

This article sought to explore how widely women of color are represented in the only Black history textbook on the market in comparison to two mainstream US history textbooks.

Our findings reveal that Black women are not represented fully enough in US history textbooks, which leads us to suggest that there are significant gaps in the social studies curriculum. One way to remedy the situation is to draw on widely available images of women online, in particular from the Library of Congress's vast Internet database.

However, we found that the Black history textbook shows women in a variety of non-stereotypical public and political roles. Arguably, mainstream US history textbooks today do not scratch the surface of available images of Black women that could be used as teaching tools. We have provided examples of how teachers can incorporate images that are readily available on the Library of Congress's website to enhance student learning through the application of ideas from art and photography. These approaches hold the potential to provide a more equal representation of women until textbooks and other teaching materials are more inclusive of a variety of Black women. Moreover, by drawing on current research on teaching history with art and images, this article demonstrates how to include Black women in the history curriculum in thoughtful ways that go beyond an additive or contribution approach.

---

<sup>1</sup> On gender, see Janice Law Trecker, "Women in U.S. History High School Textbooks, *Social Education* 35 (March 1971): 248-260; Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, "Integrating Women's History: The Case of United States History High School Textbooks, *The History Teacher* 19, no. 2 (1986): 211-262; and Roger Clark, Jeffrey Allard, and Timothy Mahoney, "How Much of the Sky? Women in American High School History Textbooks from the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s, *Social Education* 68, no. 1 (2004): 57-62.

<sup>2</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, eds., *African American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Tetreault, "Integrating Women's History."

<sup>4</sup> Louis P. Masur, "'Pictures Have Now Become a Necessity': The Use of Images in American History Textbooks," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1409-1424; Rachel Mattson, "Using Visual Historical Methods in the K-12 Classroom: Tactical Heuristics," in *History as Art, Art as History: Contemporary Art and Social Studies*

---

*Education*, eds. Dipti Desai, Jessica Hamlin, and Rachel Mattson (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Tracey Weis, "Teaching Women's History with Visual Images," in *Clio in the Classroom: A Guide for Teaching U.S. Women's History*, eds. Carol Berkin, Margaret S. Crocco, and Barbara Winslow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Figures for images in A. Cayton, E. Perry, and A. Winkler, *America: Pathways to the Present* (Needham, MA: Prentice Hall, 1998) and G. Danzer, K. de Alva, J. Jorge, J. Wilson, and Nancy Woloch, *The Americans* (New York: McDougal Littell, Inc., 1998) are found in Clark, Allard, and Mahoney, "How Much of the Sky?," 58.

<sup>6</sup> Nel Noddings, "The Care Tradition: Beyond 'Add Women and Stir,'" *Theory Into Practice* 40, no. 1 (2001): 29-34.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Renee Hobbs, "Strengthening Media Education in the Twenty-First Century: Opportunities for the State of Pennsylvania," *Arts Education Policy Review* 106, no. 4 (2005), 13-23 and Gretchen Schwarz, "What is Media Literacy, Who Cares, and Why?" in *Media Literacy: Transforming Curriculum and Teaching*, eds. Gretchen Schwarz and Pamela U. Brown (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 5-17.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Werner, "Reading Visual Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 3 (2002): 401-428 and William Gaudelli, "Interpreting Democratic Images: Secondary Students' Reading of Visual Texts," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2009): 111-130.

<sup>9</sup> The heuristics are explained in Mattson, "Using Visual Historical Methods," 28-29. Mattson does not apply the heuristics in her chapter or show how they can be used in the history classroom. We saw this article as an opportunity to illustrate her ideas. For interpretation in teaching history, see Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2005). On various applications of interpretation in the classroom, see Sam Wineburg, "Thinking Like a Historian," *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly* (Winter 2010): 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> All images are from the Library of Congress' online database. Links for the images can be found [Where do editors want us to include the links? In a table at the end?]. This article was prepared, in part, with the support of a Teaching with Primary Sources Grant from the Library of Congress.

<sup>11</sup> See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) and Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

---

<sup>12</sup> Christine Woyshner, "Picturing Women: Gender, Images, and Representation in Social Studies," *Social Education* 70, no. 6 (2006): 358-362.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* and Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Women Professional Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Mattson, "Using Visual Historical Methods," 28.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> and <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0104/slaves.html>.

Accessed 9 December 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See their names and additional information on their personal papers at

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003652501/>

<sup>17</sup> See Trecker, "Women in U.S. History High School Textbooks," and Melba Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Woyshner, "Picturing Women," 361-362.

<sup>19</sup> Mattson, "Using Visual Historical Methods," 29.

<sup>20</sup> Weis, "Teaching Women's History with Visual Images," 225.