


5-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Thomson, Sarah L. (2017) "Thomas Jefferson, Slavery, and the Language of the Textbook: Addressing Problematic Representations of Race and Power," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 32: Iss. 2, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2161>

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# Thomas Jefferson, Slavery, and the Language of the Textbook: Addressing Problematic Representations of Race and Power

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Sarah Thomson is a former middle school teacher and Doctoral Candidate in Educational Studies at the University of Michigan. She teaches elementary and secondary social studies methods courses and works with teachers to develop students' analytical reading, writing, and thinking skills in history.

## Research

# Thomas Jefferson, Slavery, and the Language of the Textbook: Addressing Problematic Representations of Race and Power

SARAH THOMSON

Our country continues to grapple with legacies of racial inequality perpetuated under a 250-year-old system of human bondage. At a time when Americans find themselves increasingly divided by race and class, educators need to understand the ways that curriculum materials represent (or, misrepresent) racial and social injustices. Developing this understanding could help us, as teachers, make informed choices about classroom texts and engage in teaching practices that encourage the development of students' critical consciousness (Freire, 1968).

Scholars have identified significant issues with how communities of color are misrepresented or silenced within U.S. History curricula (Brown & Au, 2014). There are particular problems with the ways enslaved people and the institution of slavery (or, enslavement) are portrayed in K-12 classrooms. When enslavement is included in the curriculum, its atrocities are underplayed (Brown & Brown, 2010), its impact is generally confined to one time period or geographic region of the United States, and its driving forces are ambiguous. If enslaved people are included as a part of the curriculum, they tend to be male, misrepresented as "workers" (Fernandez & Hauser, 2015), and passive recipients of others' actions rather than active change agents.

Yet, attempts to address these issues can quickly turn into partisan, racially charged debates about which history to teach (Benen, 2014; Urist, 2015). Not surprisingly, most K-12 curriculum materials tend to reflect the cultural and political context in which they exist, and in the current American context, politicians, parents, and special interest groups deeply disagree on how to teach about America's past, and who should make decisions about the U.S. history cur-

riculum. Even though academic scholarship and public institutions, including the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., may reflect progressive, critical approaches to representing historic systems of oppression and inequality, these revised portrayals do not necessarily trickle down to K-12 classrooms.

To illustrate the problem of how race and power can be represented in curriculum materials about America's past, I offer the case of Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with the Hemings family. Thomas Jefferson is certainly one of the most ubiquitous figures in American history. A recent glance at a nationally known eighth grade U.S. history textbook reveals 24 different sub-entries under "Jefferson, Thomas" in the index. Anecdotally, any teacher or parent can relay how Jefferson is typically presented in elementary and secondary classrooms: as a revered Founding Father known chiefly for his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and his beautiful grounds at Monticello; founder of the University of Virginia and the man who wrote the famous lines: "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Yet, most curricular materials available to teachers do not offer students the opportunity to explore contradictions between Jefferson's public writings about equality and his personal reality as a slaveholder who fathered children with one of the many women that he enslaved.

In this paper, I compare the language features of two different texts on the topic of Thomas Jefferson and enslavement, and consider how these texts present historical knowledge differently through their language choices. One text is a well-regarded history textbook from the *Social Studies Alive!* series, and the other is a scholarly work by Dr. Annette Gordon-Reed, a Jefferson historian and Black female scholar.

Findings from this small-scale study suggest that Gordon-Reed makes a different argument than the textbook about Thomas Jefferson and the enslaved people in his life. In other words, these two kinds of writing might represent the past in fundamentally different ways. Based on this analysis and recommendations from other scholars, I suggest methods that teachers can use to help students develop a more authentic understanding of enslavement, the experiences of enslaved African American men and women, and how written texts convey meaning and power relationships through language.

### Theoretical Perspective

This paper rests on the underlying idea that language constructs and conveys meaning. Often, these meanings are not obvious to the reader, speaker, or listener, but are realized through the language and grammar. Systemic functional linguistics, or SFL, offers a theory of language to help answer questions about how a text means what it does, and how a text contributes to shaping the social context in which it exists (Schleppegrell, 2012). Developed by Michael Halliday (1985/1994), SFL is a linguistic theory that argues humans make meaning through language, as well as other semiotic symbol systems, in social contexts. SFL contends that language reflects and helps to shape the contexts in which it is used. In the context of K-12 classrooms in the United States, then, the language in textbooks and curricular materials reflects the political context in which those texts were created, and shapes how students and teachers understand the historical events, actors, and concepts presented in the materials. SFL offers analytic tools for examining how people, concepts, and events are represented and evaluated in the language of a text.

SFL-based approaches to discourse analysis have been applied to written texts in classrooms, primarily to provide students and teachers with access to disciplinary knowledge, including knowledge of the distinct genres and language features of each discipline. To date, researchers have applied SFL methods of discourse analysis to students and teachers' writing in history (Coffin, 2006a; 2006b) as well as school history textbooks (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Coffin, 2003; Orteiza, 2003). As a language-based pedagogy, SFL and a focus on metalanguage has been proven to help students, particularly English Learners and Language Minority students, develop academic language and make meaning from written

text across a range of disciplines (Palincsar & Schleppegrell, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2013; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Orteiza, 20014). However, to my knowledge, scholars have not yet applied SFL methods of discourse analysis to historians' writing about the past. This study builds on these previous discourse analysis studies and offers a slightly different approach by going beyond the classroom to compare how a history textbook and a well-known historian position and evaluate Thomas Jefferson and enslaved people through their language choices.

### Methods

The data for this analysis comes from two different written texts: *The Hemingses of Monticello* by Dr. Annette Gordon-Reed (see Gordon-Reed, 2008) and *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* from the Teacher's Curriculum Institute or TCI (see Teacher's Curriculum Institute, 2010). Dr. Annette Gordon-Reed is considered one of the foremost scholars on Thomas Jefferson and received the 2008 National Book Award and the 2009 Pulitzer Prize in History for *Hemingses*. In the late 1990s, her historical research changed the scholarship on Thomas Jefferson regarding his relationship with Sally Hemings and the children he fathered with her. *The Hemingses of Monticello* is an academic work written for public audiences about the history of the Hemings family and their relationships with Thomas Jefferson's family. Gordon-Reed's book provides in-depth context to describe different aspects of Thomas Jefferson's life, which can help readers understand his contradictory choices. For all of these reasons, her text seemed like an ideal choice this analysis.

The second text, *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* is a fifth grade textbook used by many school districts throughout the country and generally regarded more highly than other textbooks. I selected this elementary textbook because it includes a section entitled "Jefferson's Conflict: Ideas vs. Reality" (TCI, 2010, pp. 168-171), which spoke directly to the issues raised in *Hemingses*. In contrast, the secondary TCI textbook (TCI, 2011) had nothing in its pages about Thomas Jefferson's contradictory views on equality and enslavement. In fact, the secondary text includes only two references to the fact that Jefferson owned slaves. Although it would be worthwhile to compare these two textbook accounts in a future study, for the purposes of this analysis, the fifth grade textbook excerpt on "Jefferson's Conflict" spoke more directly

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to the issues that Dr. Gordon-Reed raises in her book.

Some might claim that a fifth grade text is not an appropriate comparison against a historian's text, arguing that something written for fifth graders would necessarily exclude information about a former president's slaveholding and his relationships with his slaves. One might argue that a text written for secondary students is more likely to include this information, believing this is more developmentally appropriate material for older students. However, it is important to analyze texts written for younger students precisely because this may be their first, formative encounter with writing about the past, and these texts inform their developing understanding of American enslavement and famous historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson.

### Data Analysis

This study employs two different and complementary SFL-based discourse analysis methods: social actor analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2008) and APPRAISAL (Martin, 2000; Coffin, 2003). Social actor analysis is a form of linguistically oriented critical discourse analysis that evaluates how social actors are represented in text (Van Leeuwen, 2008). When applied to texts about the past, social actor analysis allows us to see which actors ("who") are included and excluded, the kinds of roles that each actor is given in a text, and which actors have agency. In this study, I used Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008, p. 52) to identify the social actors included in *The Hemingses of Monticello* and *Social Studies Alive!* and to determine whether they were given active or passive roles in each text.

*Activation* occurs in a text when a social actor, such as Thomas Jefferson, is represented as the active force doing something in an activity. In contrast, *passivation* occurs when a social actor, such as an enslaved person, undergoes the activity or receives someone else's action. The following excerpt from the *Social Studies Alive!* textbook provides an illustrative example of these two roles:

"**Jefferson** took steps against slavery. In the 1760s and 1770s, **he** helped lead efforts to end the importing of slaves into the colonies" (Teacher's Curriculum Institute, 2010, p. 169).

In this excerpt, Thomas Jefferson (in bold) is represented grammatically as activated because he plays an active role by taking steps and helping lead efforts. The individuals that Jef-

erson owned, represented here as "slaves" (underlined), are passivated in this excerpt because they are on the receiving end of Jefferson's efforts. Further, "slaves" here benefit from Jefferson's actions. As a result, Jefferson is portrayed in the textbook excerpt as having more agency than enslaved persons, referred to here as a passive group: "slaves."

To conduct a social actor analysis, I first identified the social actors in each line of written text from the two data sources. Then, I calculated the number of times (frequency) each social actor appears in both texts. Next, I used Van Leeuwen's framework to determine whether the social actors were given active or passive roles in each line of text and I calculated the proportion of activation vs. passivation. Finally, I identified a few obvious instances in which the social actors were identified as named individuals (*individualization*) or as a collective group (*assimilation*). This kind of analysis allowed me to see which historical actors were represented as having agency in the past, and compare the representations from historian Annette Gordon-Reed's text to the fifth grade social studies textbook.

In addition to social actor analysis, I used Martin's (2000) APPRAISAL framework to identify evaluative patterns in the two historical texts. APPRAISAL was developed by a group of systemic functional linguists in order to identify evaluative meaning in discourse in a range of social contexts. This framework can help us identify and compare emotional evaluations (AFFECT) expressed by a speaker or author, ethical and moral judgments of people (JUDGMENT), and evaluations of the social value of things or ideas (APPRECIATION). In this study, I primarily used the systems of JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION within the APPRAISAL framework to compare how historical actors are judged and historical events/ideas are appreciated within *The Hemingses of Monticello* and *Social Studies Alive!* I used Coffin's (2003) study of JUDGEMENT patterns in students' historical writing to guide my analysis of these two historical texts.

JUDGEMENT is a system that serves to appraise human behavior and provides a method of uncovering implicit judgments within a text. For example, consider the following excerpts from *Social Studies Alive!* and *The Hemingses of Monticello*, in which JUDGEMENT is underlined:

Ex. 1: "Thomas Jefferson saw the need to end slavery."  
(+ve propriety)

Ex. 2: "Slaves, male and female, constantly tested the

boundaries of their existences and had their own personal sense of themselves as individuals within the context of slavery.” (+ve capacity)

In the first example from the TCI textbook, the language reveals a positive JUDGEMENT of propriety, or how moral someone is. This excerpt directly ascribes Jefferson as an ethical person because he recognizes that slavery is wrong and must be abolished. In the second excerpt from Gordon-Reed’s text, the language reveals a positive JUDGEMENT of capacity, or how capable someone is. This excerpt expresses admiration for male and female slaves’ capacity to be self-actualized individuals even within the context of a brutal, dehumanizing institution. Together, these tools of discourse analysis enabled me to identify and compare evaluations of people and ideas from the past in different texts.

**Findings**

Social actor and APPRAISAL analyses revealed significant differences in the ways that two historical texts represented and evaluated historical actors, events, and ideas from the past. The two historical texts, *The Hemingses of Monticello* and *Social Studies Alive!* included some of the same social actors and pointedly excluded others. For example, both texts included “Thomas Jefferson” and “slaves” or “enslaved people.”

**Table 1: How are social actors represented in the TCI textbook?**

Social Actor	Active %	Passive %
Thomas Jefferson (N=40)	98%	3%
The slave trade/slavery (N=13)	23%	77%
Jefferson’s words (N=10)	20%	80%
Delegates of the 2nd Continental Congress (N=8)	100%	0%
Slaves/slave labor (N=5)	20%	80%
Enslaved Africans (n=3)	0%	100%
Abigail Adams (n=2)	100%	0%
Samuel Johnson (n=2)	100%	0%

**Table 1: How are social actors represented in the TCI textbook?**

However, overlapping social actors were differentially included as a proportion of all social actors in each text, and each text represented these actors somewhat differently. Table 1 shows how the *Social Studies Alive!* textbook allocates roles to some of the most frequently represented social actors.

As the table shows, Thomas Jefferson was by far the main social actor included in the textbook excerpt, appearing in 40 of 118 instances (34%) that a social actor appeared in the text. Jefferson was activated in the overwhelming majority (98%) of these instances. In contrast, the three social actors that are references to slavery (“the slave trade,” “slaves,”

and “enslaved Africans”) were passivated in the majority of instances. Two other white social actors, Abigail Adams and Samuel Johnson, are activated 100% of the time they appear in the text. Even these actors are given agency in an excerpt explicitly focused on Jefferson’s conflicting views on slavery; yet the enslaved individuals that create Jefferson’s conflict are not. Sally Hemings, the enslaved African American woman who was Jefferson’s wife’s half-sister and the mother of seven of his children, is entirely excluded from the textbook excerpt. Her exclusion seems particularly ironic within a textbook excerpt about slavery entitled “Jefferson’s Conflict: Ideas vs. Reality.”

In the selected excerpts from *The Hemingses of Monticello*, Thomas Jefferson is also the most frequently included social actor; however, he is included ten times (rather than 40), and followed closely behind by Mary and Sally Hemings

**Table 2: How are social actors represented in The Hemingses of Monticello?**

Social Actor	Active %	Passive %
Thomas Jefferson (N=10)	90%	10%
Mary & Sally Hemings (n=9)	22%	67%
African American women (n=8)	63%	38%
Enslaved women (n=6)	67%	33%
The law (n=4)	100%	0%
White men (n=4)	25%	75%
Ruthless self-interest (n=3)	100%	0%
White supremacy (n=3)	100%	0%

**Table 2: How are social actors represented in The Hemingses of Monticello?**

(see Table 2). In contrast to their representation in the *Social Studies Alive!* textbook excerpt, people of color (e.g., “African American women,” “enslaved women,” “Madison Hemings”) are primarily activated, rather than passivated in Gordon-Reed’s text.

People of color are also individualized more often in Gordon-Reed’s text, referred to by their names (Sally Hemings, Madison Hemings), while people of color are assimilated in the TCI textbook excerpt, referred to as a group (slaves, enslaved Africans). Yet, all three white social actors are individually named in the textbook: Thomas Jefferson, Abigail Adams, and Samuel Johnson. Social actor analysis of these two historical texts indicates that people of color are represented as having far more agency in the historian’s text than they are in the textbook.

In addition, social actor analysis revealed other interesting language patterns in *The Hemingses of Monticello* that were not present in the textbook excerpt. Specifically, inanimate institutions and ideas were included and activated in Gordon-Reed’s text, suggesting that the invisible forces be-

hind systems of oppression (like slavery) actually do things. For example, she writes “**white supremacy shaped** American consciousness.” This form of inclusion and activation of social actors in a text about American slavery and the Founding Fathers could help the reader see that beliefs like white supremacy and ruthless self-interest, held by many white individuals of the time, were themselves forces that produced outcomes.

In addition to the aforementioned differences in representation between the historian’s text and the history textbook, I identified different patterns of evaluative meaning in

**Table 3: Judgment Patterns in TCI Textbook**

Thomas Jefferson	Slaves/Enslaved People
8 x positive propriety	5 x negative normality
2 x positive capacity	1 x positive normality
2 x positive tenacity	1 x positive capacity

**Table 3: Judgment Patterns in TCI Textbook**

the two texts. Specifically, a JUDGEMENT analysis of the two main overlapping social actors in each text (Thomas Jefferson and slaves) revealed different evaluative patterns. Table 3 shows how Thomas Jefferson and enslaved people are judged within the *Social Studies Alive!* text excerpt:

As the table shows, Thomas Jefferson escapes negative JUDGEMENT in the textbook excerpt. Instead, he is judged positively as an ethical person (“Jefferson thought slavery was wrong”), a pragmatist (“But he thought it would take time”), and a resolute leader (“he had worked hard on the draft of the Declaration of Independence”). Slaves, on the other hand, are negatively judged in the textbook as strange (“colonists did not think that Africans were equal to white people”) or unfortunate (“could not live side-by-side with whites”). Through these evaluative patterns, the textbook excerpt suggests that although Thomas Jefferson contradicted himself by writing about equality for all and still owning other human beings, he was a moral person who wanted to do the “right” thing but was a victim of his time period. The humans he held in bondage, who are never named, are portrayed as abnormal and unfortunate.

These patterns contrast sharply with the JUDGEMENT patterns in the selected excerpts from Gordon-Reed’s book. The patterns in Gordon-Reed’s text reveal a different perspective on the history of Thomas Jefferson’s views on equality and lived experiences with slavery. As Table 4 shows, positive and negative JUDGEMENTS are distributed differently across Jefferson and slaves. Moreover, while the textbook ex-

cerpt primarily judges Jefferson positively as an ethical and moral leader (eight JUDGEMENTS of positive propriety) who wanted to end slavery, the historian’s excerpts primarily judge Jefferson negatively as a ruthless person (six JUDGEMENTS of negative propriety) who “could see [black

**Table 4: Judgment Patterns in The Hemingses of Monticello**

Thomas Jefferson	Slaves/Enslaved People
6 x negative propriety	4 x negative capacity
2 x negative veracity	3 x positive capacity
	2 x negative normality
	1 x positive tenacity

**Table 4: Judgment Patterns in *The Hemingses of Monticello***

women] as ill equipped...for fieldwork and still send them there because it suited his needs and the needs of his society” and “cut the [Hemings] women off from the traditions of their African foremothers.”

Gordon-Reed’s text also judges enslaved people more positively than the textbook, presenting them as resolute individuals who “sought transformation of their lives” and normal men and women who “thought of themselves as... people.” Text excerpts from *The Hemingses of Monticello* also include four negative JUDGEMENTS of slaves’ capacity; however, these examples serve to emphasize the fact that enslaved people did not have access to the same power or structures as their owners (e.g., “Enslaved women practically and legally could not refuse consent”). In contrast to the textbook excerpts, the historian’s writing portrays enslaved people as persevering individuals in spite of the fact that people like Thomas Jefferson denied them their legal rights.

## Implications and Recommendations

Together, these analyses demonstrate how two texts on the same historical topic construct very different representations and evaluations of the past through their language choices. A student who reads excerpts from *The Hemingses of Monticello* would come away with a fundamentally different interpretation of 18th century, of Thomas Jefferson, and of the people of color who were part of his life than the student who reads only *Social Studies Alive! America’s Past*. This is a troubling finding, because most students in American classrooms tend to read one text on a historical topic, not many. It also suggests that although recent historical scholarship may have influenced portrayals of slaveholding in the public

sphere, including Jefferson as a deeply flawed character in the hit Broadway musical “Hamilton,” and recent changes in the interpretive exhibits at Monticello (Thompson, 2017), this has not translated into changes in K-12 curricula.

The purpose of this discourse analysis is not to vilify historical figures like Thomas Jefferson, and Dr. Gordon-Reed does not do this in her book. The purpose of this study is rather to demonstrate how reading texts like Gordon-Reed’s could help students see African American individuals from the 18th and 19th centuries as people, not a distanced other. Reading texts like Gordon-Reed’s could also help students better understand the ways in which these individuals’ capacity was truly taken away, and see that African American men and women have always been a central part of American history. Normally the stories of communities of color are limited in 5th grade to one chapter on slavery or Native Americans in “The New World” in the textbook. That said, it is not necessarily reasonable or desirable to ask upper elementary and middle school students to read and analyze excerpts from *The Hemingses of Monticello*. What ideas about language and text, then, can we take from this analysis to inform our teaching about the intersection of traumatic historical events and famous figures like Jefferson?

As a first step, we as teachers can use language more intentionally when we talk about the system of slavery and enslaved people with students. For example, we can use the language of “enslaved men and women” or “bondsppeople,” and refer to individual’s names when available, rather referring to a group of “slaves.” Similarly, rather than using the language of “slave” and “master” we can use the language of “enslaver” or “slaveholder,” to emphasize the action taken by certain individuals to hold other humans in bondage. Using such language is a small step toward responding to the problems of representation described earlier, and reflects the language used by historians of slavery (e.g., Gordon-Reed, 2008; Ramey Berry & Alford, 2012).

In addition, there are age-appropriate texts available – both primary sources and literature – that authentically reflect the perspectives and experiences of enslaved people during the 1700s and 1800s in the United States. Thomas, Reese, and Horning (2016) offer a recommended list of 13 children’s book titles for K-5 learners, including:

- *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (2010, Laban Carrick Hill)
- *Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story From the Underground*

*Railroad* (2007, Ellen Levine)

- *Love Twelve Miles Long* (2011, Glenda Armand)
- *The People Could Fly: The Picture Book* (2004, Virginia Hamilton)

On the topic of Thomas Jefferson and the Hemings family, teachers could use the illustrated children’s book *My Name is James Madison Hemings* (2016), a New York Times Notable Book about Sally Hemings’s son, James Madison, whose testimony forms the basis for much of Gordon-Reed’s (2008) scholarship. Another option for this topic is the trade book *Jefferson’s Children: The Story of One American Family* (2002) by Shannon Lanier and Jane Feldman. For middle school learners, young adult historical fiction like *The Seeds of America* trilogy by Laurie Halse Anderson offer a window into Revolutionary America told from the perspective of a young African American enslaved woman. And hundreds of first-hand life histories from enslaved individuals are available through the Library of Congress collection, *Born into Slavery: Slave Narratives and the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938*.

Finally, teachers could try using a modified version of the language analysis methods I discuss here with students. For example, after identifying a section of text that discusses slavery, you could identify all of the people (“social actors”) mentioned in the text, and put them in different categories. Ask students to consider questions like, are these people named as individuals? Are they listed collectively as one group? Are these people *doing* the action in the text, or are they on the receiving end of someone else’s action? What do the answers to these questions tell us about the author’s perspective, or the meaning in the text? This kind of language analysis can be done with younger learners to support reading comprehension and critical analysis of text.

This paper suggests the importance of exposing students to multiple texts and multiple historical interpretations, particularly those from recent historical scholarship. Future research could explore how students evaluate historical figures and events differently after reading these different kinds of texts. Future teaching should develop students’ critical reading, writing, and thinking *alongside* their analysis of how historical groups or individuals are represented and evaluated in text. By developing these skills, students could gain a critical awareness of how historical interpretations and texts construct different identities and realities for groups of people in the present.



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