



# Racism and Colonialism in Geography Textbooks, 1840s to 1950s



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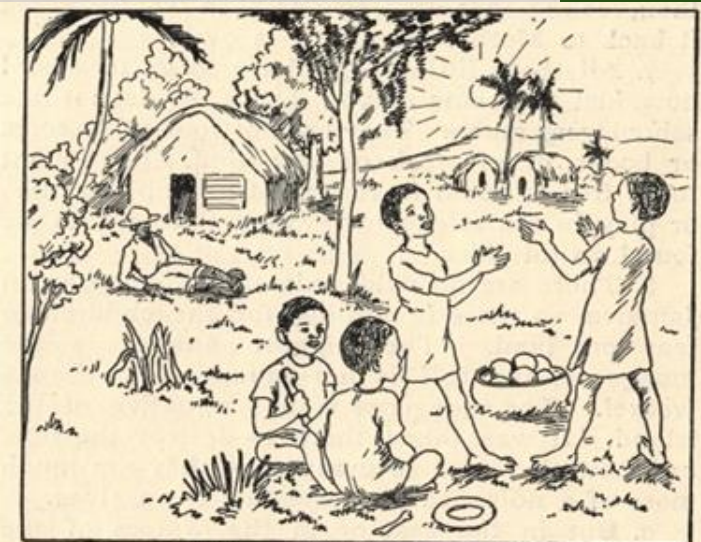
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2023 Annual Meeting

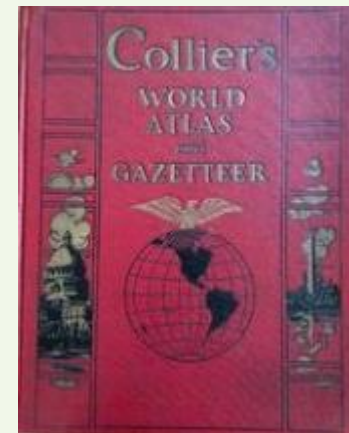
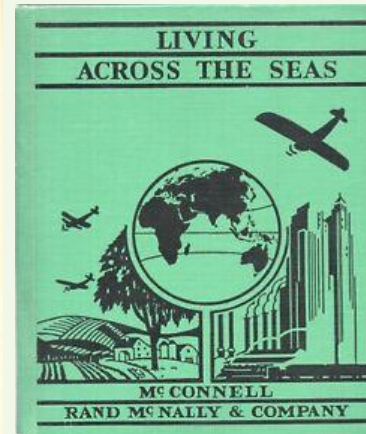
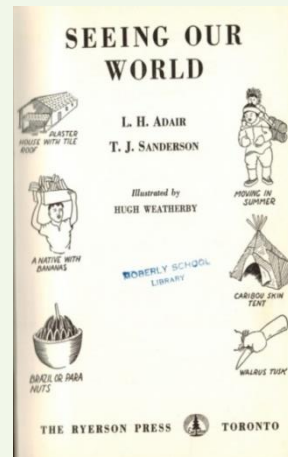
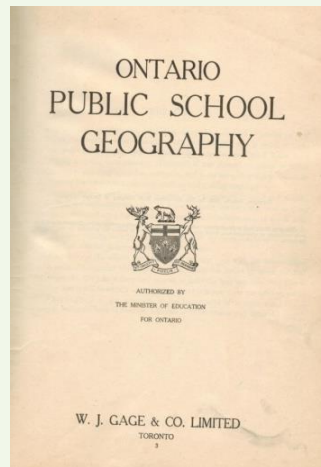
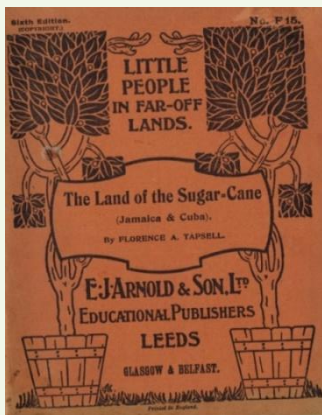
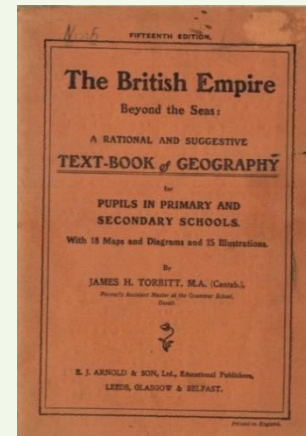
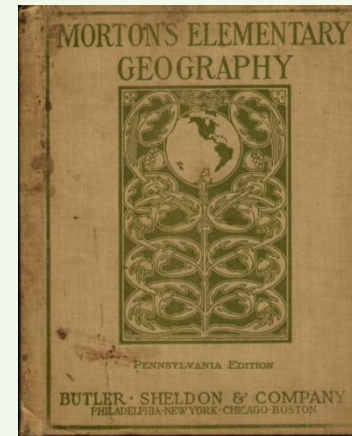
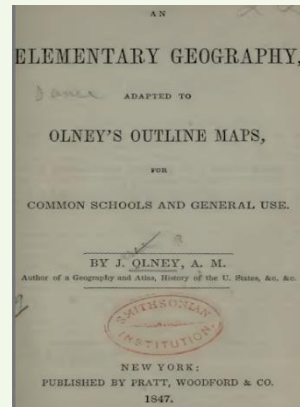
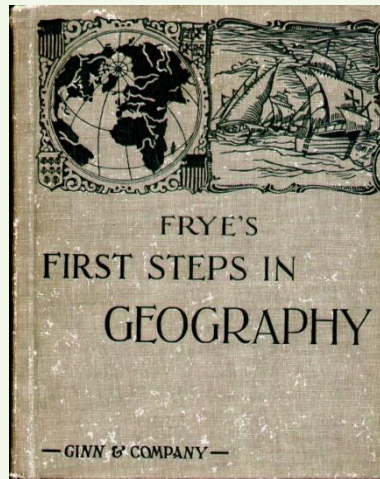
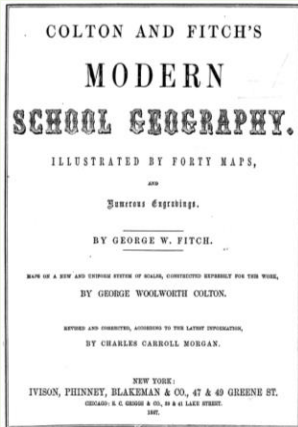
Denver, Colorado

27 March 2023



Children at play in Jamaica.—Page 6.

# Geography Textbooks 1847-1955





# *Geography Textbooks 1847-1955*

- Geography textbooks introduce children to foreign lands and people.
- They are considered scientific and authoritative, and leave a durable legacy on our world views.
- This study analyzes descriptions of race and culture from typical British and North American grade school geography textbooks published between 1847 and 1955.

**Devil Priests** (Mortimer 1854)



*Geography readers told stories about foreign countries and peoples, often designed to highlight Western superiority.*

# Mitchell (1850) Title Page

This cover page has a plate illustrating the “Stages of Society” which include *savage*, *barbarous*, *half-civilized*, *civilized* and *enlightened*.

Positioning this image on the title page indicates that the rating of societies is a critical concept.



MITCHELL'S SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY.  
THIRD REVISED EDITION.  
A SYSTEM OF  
MODERN GEOGRAPHY,  
COMPRISING A DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT STATE OF THE  
WORLD,  
AND ITS FIVE GREAT DIVISIONS,  
AMERICA, EUROPE, ASIA, AFRICA AND OCEANICA,  
WITH THEIR SEVERAL  
EMPIRES, KINGDOMS, STATES, TERRITORIES, ETC.  
EMBELLISHED BY NUMEROUS ENGRAVINGS.  
ADAPTED TO THE CAPACITY OF YOUTH.



ILLUSTRATED BY AN  
ATLAS OF TWENTY-EIGHT MAPS,  
DRAWN AND ENGRAVED TO ACCOMPANY THE WORK.

BY S. AUGUSTUS MITCHELL.

PHILADELPHIA:  
THOMAS, COWPERTHWAIT & CO.  
1850.



# Mitchell (1850) Races of Men

The “Races of Men” include European or Caucasian (White), Asian or Mongolian (Yellow), American Indian (Red), Malay (Brown), and African or Negro (Black).

*“The European or Caucasian is the most noble of the five races of men. It excels all others in learning and the arts, and includes the most powerful nations of ancient and modern times. The most valuable institutions of society, and the most important and useful inventions, have originated with the people of this race.”*

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## GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITIONS.

291. What is the frontier of a country?  
 A. Those parts which lie near the border or boundary, the outside portions.  
 292. Thus we say, the Northern frontier, the Southern frontier, &c., according as the parts are situated to the North, South, East, or West.  
 293. What are the maritime parts of a country?  
 A. Those parts which border on the sea coast.



Asiatic. Malay. European. African. American.

## — 25 — RACES OF MEN.

294. Man is the most perfect of the works of God, being created in his own image, and formed by his wisdom, to subdue and exercise dominion over all the earth.  
 295. From whom has the whole human race descended?  
 A. From our first parents, Adam and Eve.  
 296. What does the human race present?  
 A. Several varieties, differing greatly from each other in colour, form, and features.  
 297. What is the cause of the varieties in the human race?  
 A. It is probably owing to a difference in climate, food, and mode of life, and no doubt partly to causes which we do not understand.  
 298. What are the various races of mankind?

## GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITIONS.

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- A. They are five, the European or Caucasian, Asiatic or Mongolian, American, Malay, and African or negro.  
 299. How may they be classed in regard to their colour?  
 A. Into the White, Yellow, Red, Brown, and Black races.  
 300. What nations does the European or White race include?  
 A. The nations of Europe, Western Asia, the North of Africa, with all the white inhabitants of America and other regions.  
 301. What nations does the Asiatic or Yellow race include?  
 A. All the nations of Asia east of the Ganges river, (excepting the Malays of Malacca.)  
 302. What other nations belong to this race?  
 A. The Finns and Laplanders of Europe, and the Esquimaux of America, also belong to the Asiatic race.  
 303. What part of the earth does the American or copper-coloured race inhabit?  
 A. The whole of the American continent, except those parts occupied by the descendants of Europeans, with the Esquimaux and Negroes.  
 304. What nations does the Malay or Brown race include?  
 A. The people of Malacca and Malaysia, with those of Polynesia and New Zealand.  
 305. What part of the earth does the African or Black race inhabit?  
 A. All Western, Central, and Southern Africa, with a considerable part of Madagascar and Australasia.  
 306. A large number of this race are found in both North and South America, where they are chiefly in a state of slavery.

307. The European or Caucasian is the most noble of the five races of men. It excels all others in learning and the arts, and includes the most powerful nations of ancient and modern times. The most valuable institutions of society, and the most important and useful inventions have originated with the people of this race.

Which is the most noble of the five races of men?

In what does it excel all others?

What does it include?

What has originated with the people of this race?

To which of the races of men do the greater part of the people of the United States belong?

To which race do you belong?

F

# Redway and Hinman (1898)

Describes three principal races: white, yellow and black.

Categorizes races by their material progress from savagery to barbarianism and civilization.

are sometimes said to form the *red race* because of their reddish-yellow or copper-colored skin. They are not so numerous as the Malays, but they occupied nearly the whole of the American continent before it was settled by whites. Many of them were savages, though some tribes in the western highlands of both North and South America were much more advanced.

**Black Race.** The home of the black race is central and southern Africa and some of the Australian islands. The people of this race have coarse woolly or kinky hair, protruding lips, and dark brown or black skin. The black race includes about one tenth of the people in the world, and is the least civilized of all the races.

The *negroes*, whose home is central Africa, form the principal type of this race, while the small *Papuaes* type includes the savages of New Guinea and some other Australian islands. The natives of Australia itself have black skin but straight hair, and by some are called a separate race.

## DENSITY OF POPULATION.

Although people are found in nearly all parts of the world, very many more live in some parts than in others. A region very thickly peopled is said to have *great density of population*.

In other regions one might travel for hundreds or even thousands of miles, seldom, if ever, seeing a human being or any sign that people lived there. Such a region is said to be thinly peopled, or to have a *sparse population*.

On this map the most thickly peopled regions are shown by the darkest lining; the regions of moderate density of population, by the lighter lining; and the most thinly peopled regions, by dots.

In which grand division are the largest regions of very dense population? In what part of the grand division is each? What type lives in each? These regions do not form a large part of the continental plateau, yet they are so densely populated that they contain about two thirds of the people in the world!

In which two grand divisions are the largest regions of moderately dense population? To what types do the people of these regions in Eurasia belong? To what type do the people in central Africa belong? Where is the largest region of dense and moderately dense population in the western hemisphere? This is the eastern half of our own country. Nearly all the regions of dense and moderately dense population in North and South America, Australia, and southern Africa are occupied chiefly by Aryan people whose ancestors went there from Europe to live within the last hundred years.

What part of North America is very thinly peopled? What part of South America; of Eurasia; of Africa; of Australia? These regions together include more than half of all the conti-



Natives of Kaffria, South Africa.

nents, but the population is so sparse that they do not contain so many people as live in the two little island groups, the one east, and the other west of Eurasia. Compare this population map with the rainfall map (p. 26), and tell why some of these thinly peopled regions are not fitted for a dense population.

## MAN'S CULTURE.

**The Progress of Man.** Man is constantly learning how to make things and to do things which enable him to live more comfortably.

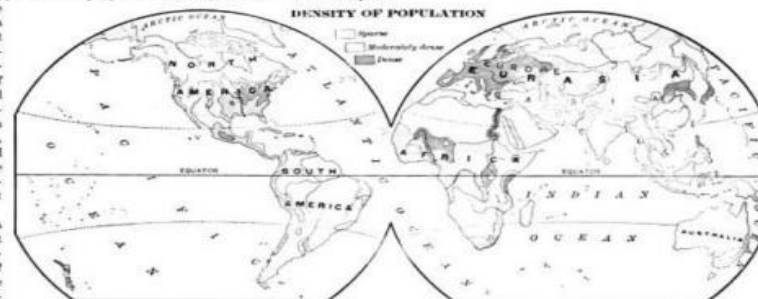
We have many conveniences nowadays, such as the electric light, railroads, sewing machines, and hundreds of other common things, which were entirely unknown when our grandparents were children. Name several others. A few hundred years ago the art of printing was unknown; the only books which then existed were written by

hand, and comparatively few people knew how to read. Some of these old books were histories, from which we learn how people lived at that time. A few thousand years ago no one in the world had yet learned how to write, and we know very little of how people then lived, since they left no written record of anything. Still it is certain that people lived long before that, because in rock deposits that are many thousands of years old, we find things that must have been made by men, such as stone arrowheads, stone axes, bits of pottery, and pieces of reindeer horn with rude pictures scratched on them.

**Savagery.** We therefore conclude that at one time, many thousands of years ago, all, or nearly all, people were more ignorant than the most savage tribes now living.

They probably did not know how to make anything, but lived in caves, wore no clothing, and ate only fruits, nuts, roots, and such insects as they could catch, and such small animals as they could kill with clubs and stones. At last some one may have learned how to tie a sharp stone on the end of a stick, and thus make a spear with which to spear fish or kill animals. Then some one may have learned that sticks rubbed together will get hot and at last burn, thus starting a fire. The most ignorant tribes in Australia to-day do not know how to do much more than this. Gradually some of the early men invented bows and arrows, discovered how to chip stones rudely into shape for arrowheads and axes, and learned how to make a canoe by hollowing out a log with fire and stone scrapers.

## DENSITY OF POPULATION



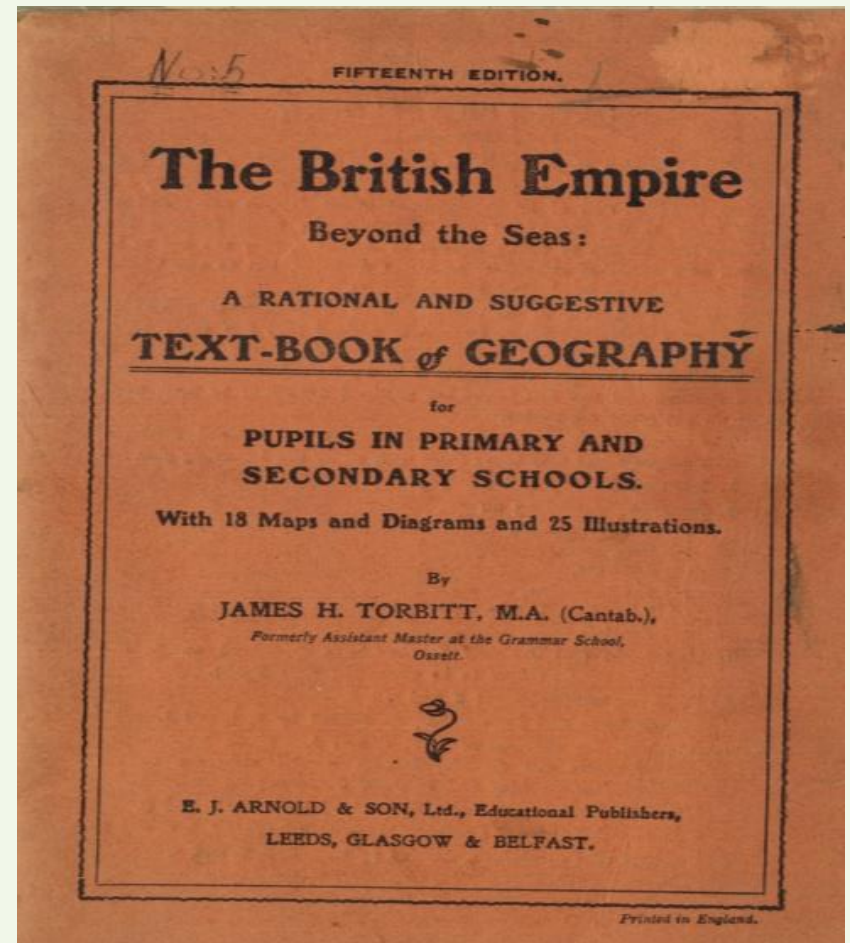


# *Torbitt (1912)*

Teaches that all British subjects live under the rule of a law which does not differential “between the settler and the native”, reinforcing the belief that there is in fact no racial prejudice or inequality in the Empire. British Supremacy is taught as universally beneficial.

## Quotes:

- “The *aborigines* of Australia are fast dying out. There are now less than 60,000. They are low in the scale of civilization” (p. 31).
- “The *Maoris*, originally from Hawaii, may be considered the native race. They are intelligent and, on the whole, quick to adapt themselves to European ideas.” (New Zealand, p. 40).
- “The Hindi is an industrious and skilful worker: he is simple in his tastes, and is a vegetarian and total abstainer.” (p. 85).



# *Tapsell (1915)*

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE LITTLE DARKIES.

1. A merry crew are these little darkies—happy, care-free, ebony mites, dressed, in their early days, in nothing at all, or perhaps in just a short shirt that is not at all in the way if they want to paddle, to make mud pies, or do any of those hundred and one things which children love all the world over.

2. If the sport of the moment is climbing trees, the shirts are slipped off and left at the foot of the tree, leaving the owners as free as the monkeys to climb aloft for banana, coconut, or orange.

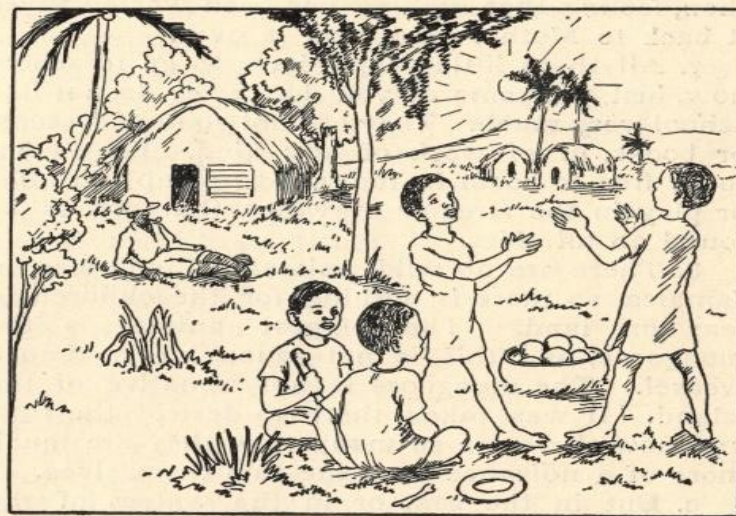
3. You do not need to see these little people to know they are in the grove. Their merry voices and shouts of laughter ring out so clear in the still, damp air, that you hear them long before you reach the place where they are at play.

4. Or maybe you hear the strains of some of the sweet old negro songs, for, little and big, the darkies all love to sing. On market days the roads ring with laughter and song, as men, women, and children carry their goods to market. They also dance as they go along the road—dance for the very joy of life and movement in the bright morning air.

Jamaica.

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5. There is one thing they love even more than dance and song, and that is eating. A little darkie is always ready and eager for his meals. The meal may consist of fruit alone, or of rice, or it may be of salt fish and vegetables cooked



Children at play in Jamaica.—Page 6.

in fat; but, whatever it is, the dark eyes grow eager and the little black faces wear a happy smile, as they watch Mother making it ready.

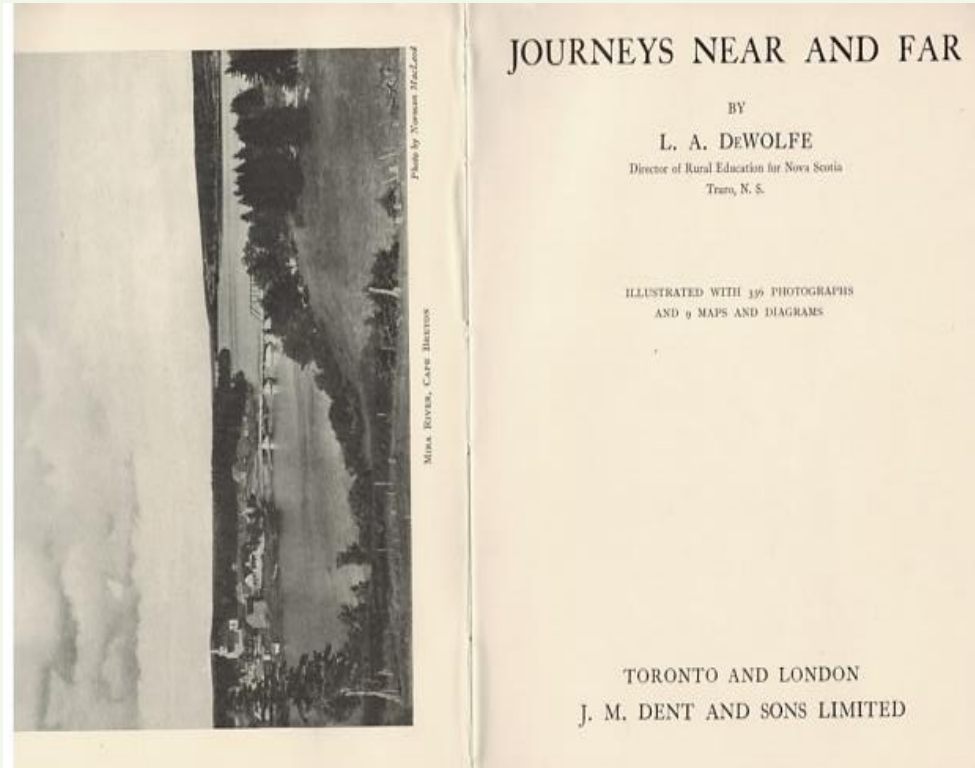
6. Then they fall to, and in a very little while there is not so much as a single scrap of food to be seen. Bones are picked as clean as clean



# DeWolf (1934)

Emphasizes the importance of tolerance and respect for different cultures. It states that,

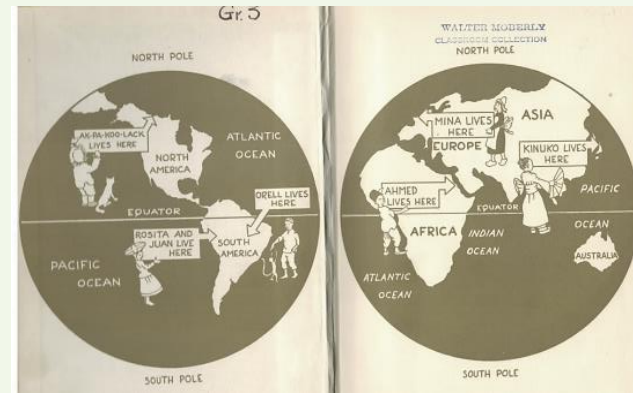
*“Unthinking people usually believe that those of other language, religion, and culture are inferior to themselves. We must remember, however, that differences do not imply inferiority. Our thoughts, habits, and beliefs depend upon the accident of birth...From this it does not follow that a person of any given nationality or religion is better or worse than his fellow-man of different creed or nationality.”*



# Adair and Sanderson (1955)

Provides basic geographic concepts and definitions, and describes the lives of children in six foreign cultures including northern Canada, Peru, Brazil, The Netherlands, Egypt and Japan.

Portrays Japan in a positive light, just a decade after World War II.



28. FESTIVALS OF JAPAN

Kinuko woke up early, raised her head and looked around to see if any of the others were up yet. No, they were all sleeping soundly, so she lay quietly down again so as not to bother anyone. The room was pleasant although little furniture was to be seen. The floor was completely covered with thick straw mats, and spread on these mats were the beds. Each bed was made of an over quilt and an under quilt and a small hard pillow.

Around the outside walls of the room were large cupboards with shelves for storing clothing and bedding during the day. At present the screens were up, separating the house into bedrooms, but these would be removed as soon as the family arose. The windows were slatted with paper-covered lattices which would also be taken down later. Kinuko could see the light shining through the lattices so she knew that the others would soon be awake.

Now there was faint rustling beyond the screen and in a moment the smiling face of Kinuko's mother appeared.

"Good morning, children," she called. "Fold up your beds and come for your baths. The water is almost ready."

Kinuko and her small brother, Chimkan, were the first out in the courtyard where the bath was prepared. It was a large round wooden tub filled with very hot water. At the edges were small bowls of soapy water from which the people would first

give themselves a sponge bath before stepping into the large tub.

The children stood aside waiting for Grandfather to appear before they stepped into the water. He was a very old man and as long as he lived he would be the head of the family. He must be first in the bath, just as he must be first to be served at meals and first in all other family matters.

While they were waiting, Kinuko told Chimkan about the large public baths of which she had heard from her cousin who lived in Tokyo. Instead of a wooden tub the city baths had a pool with steps leading down into the water. Around the edges were rooms for dressing, and on a balcony overlooking the water were tea rooms and a restaurant. As at home, many people shared the bath at one time.

Finally Grandfather appeared, followed by the other men of the household and lastly by the women. Soon they were all enjoying the nice hot water out in the sunny courtyard.

When they were finished Kinuko and Chimkan ran into the house to get dressed.

What fun they would have today. This was the "Feast of the Dolls" which is held every year in Japan on the third day of the third month. On this feast day the parents honour the girls of the family and do all they can to show how much they love them.

On the day of the "Feast of the Dolls" the little girls of Japan bring out all their dolls and dress them in their finest costumes. Some of these have been handed down through the family for hundreds

WASH TUB

WOODEN PAIL

BEDS ARE MADE ON STRAW MATS ON THE FLOOR

JAPANESE SCHOOL GIRL

YOUNG GIRL

YOUNG BOY



# Analysis of 20 Textbooks

Table compares racial and cultural descriptions and provides representative quotes for 20 geography textbooks.

Year	Title	Race and Culture Descriptions	Representative Quotes
1847	<i>Elementary Geography</i>	The various nations are divided into five races, viz. The European, The Asiatic,—The Malay,—The African,—and The American.	<p>Torrid zone inhabitants “are of a dark complexion, indolent, and effeminate. They live usually in slightly built dwellings.”</p> <p>Temperate zone inhabitants, “have fair complexions, and in the northern temperate zone, they are noted for industry, intelligence and energy, and for having ever led the way in human improvement and civilization.<sup>63</sup>”</p> <p>Frigid zone inhabitants “are few in number, of low stature, swarthy complexions, and are noted for their ignorance and stupidity.” (p. 15)</p> <p>“In the savage state, men usually live by hunting and fishing. Their wants are few, and they live almost like beasts, in miserable huts, dens, and caverns. They are generally blood-thirsty and revengeful,—as the American Indians.” (p. 17)</p>
1854	<i>Smith's First Book in Geography</i>	<p>Describes five races: European, Chinese, Malay, Indian and African. Highlights the intelligence, learning and industry of people in the United States and Europe.</p> <p>Describes temperate zone inhabitants as fair, robust, intelligent and industrious, in contrast to the dark-colored, passionate, ignorant and indolent inhabitants of the “torrid” and “frigid” zones.</p>	<p>“New England is “distinguished for the intelligence and enterprise of its inhabitants, and its valuable system of common schools.” (p. 68. This book was published in New England)</p> <p>“The people [of Africa] are generally idolaters or pagans, and show little signs of intelligence. Their complexion is mostly black.” (p. 139)</p> <p>“The inhabitants [of Oceania] are chiefly of the Malay race. By the exertions of Christian missionaries, many have been induced to abandon their barbarous customs, and adopt the usages of civilized life.” (p. 146)</p>
1854	<i>Mitchell's School Geography</i>	Describes five races: European or Caucasian (White), Asian or Mongolian (Yellow), American (Red), Malay (Brown), and African or Negro (Black). Ranks societies as savage, barbarous, high-civilized, civilized and enlightened, with Europeans rated as enlightened.	“What is the character of the enlightened nations? They are noted for the intelligence, enterprise and industry of their inhabitants; among them the arts and sciences are carried to a high state of perfection.” (p. 43)

# *Analysis of 20 Textbooks*

- Racial and cultural descriptions changed over time.
- Nineteenth Century textbooks were blatantly racist, claiming that factors such as intelligence, industry and morality are biological, so non-white races and cultures are innately inferior. Despite diverse authors and publishers, textbooks repeated key concepts and phrases. A common theme was that races and cultures evolve based on their environments, which explains, for example, why “torrid” (tropical) zone people have darker skins than in “temperate” and “frigid” zones. They often extrapolated this to argue that races and cultures that evolved in tropical areas where food and shelter are easily obtained are inherently lazier than peoples in climates that demand more effort to produce necessities.
- During the Twentieth Century they gave less attention to cultural geography and more to physical and economic geography. Rather than calling non-white races and foreign cultures inferior they highlighted the benefits that European knowledge and commerce offered natives, with the implication that foreign nations can become enlightened by emulating western culture and industry.
- Some books from the 1930-50s emphasized the importance of respecting racial and cultural differences. This marked a transition from biological to cultural analysis of race.

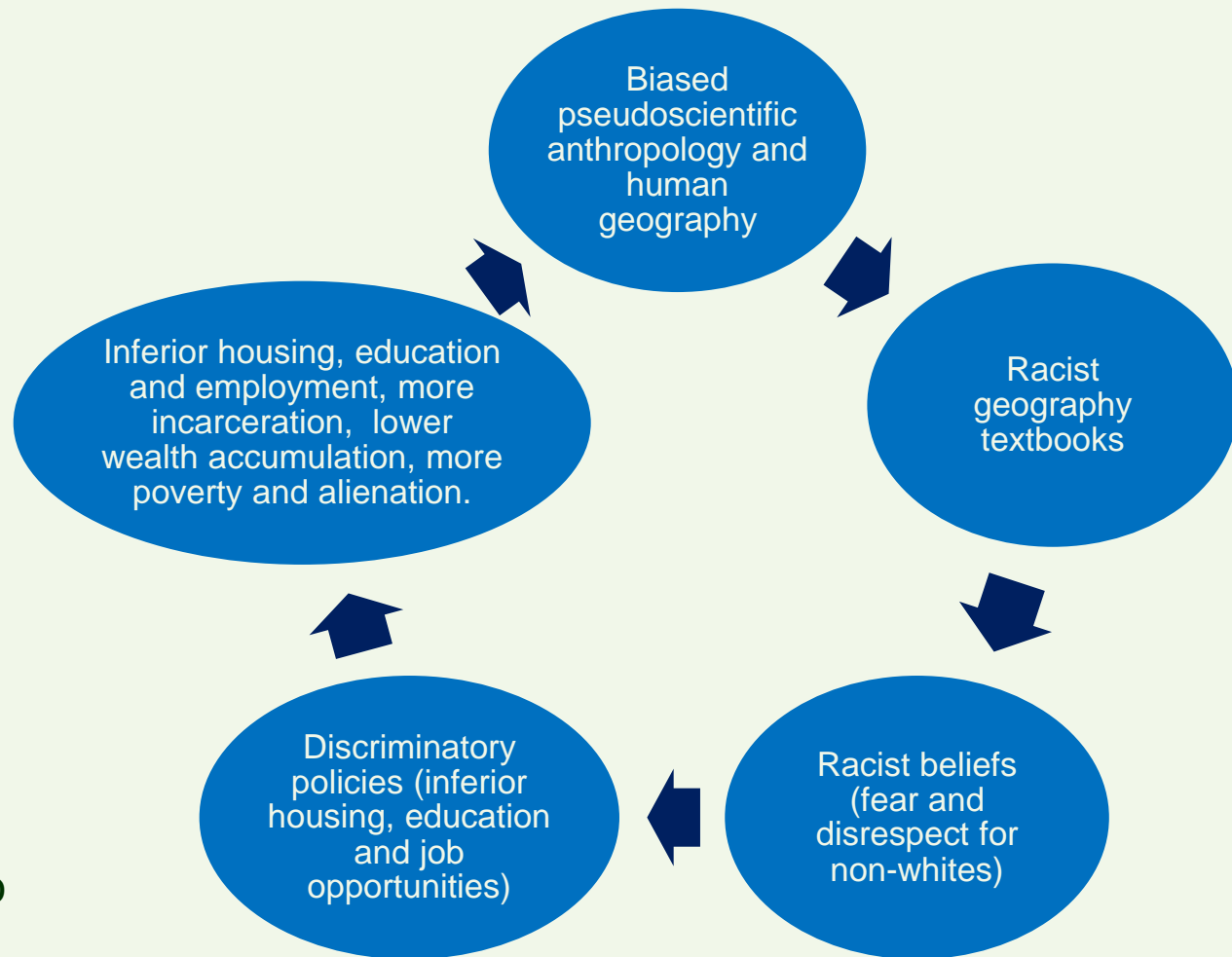


# *A Self-Reinforcing Cycle*

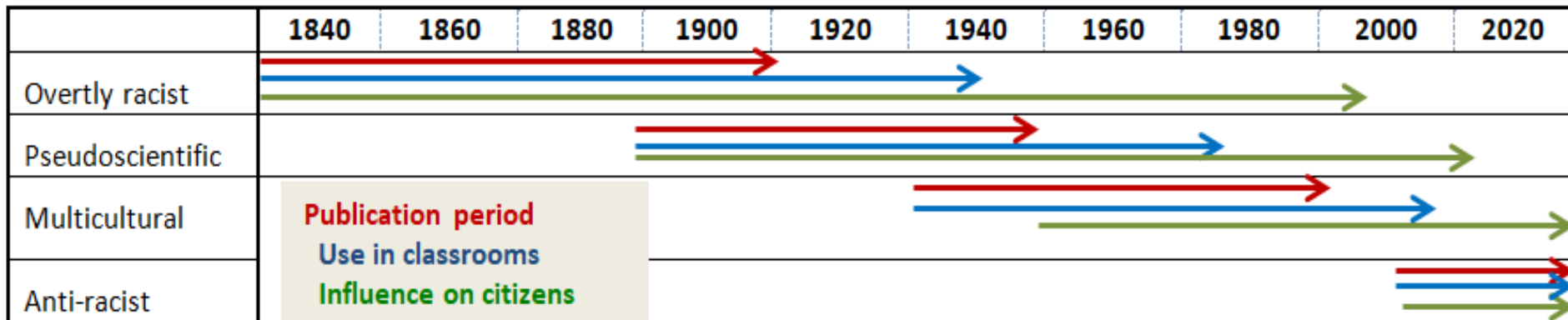
Textbooks claimed to reflect anthropological and human geography science.

They contributed to a self-reinforcing cycle of fear and disrespect for minorities, discriminatory policies, inferior economic opportunities and outcomes, that reinforce anthropological bias.

Anthropological and geographic professional organizations are working to correct these biases and harms.



# Duration of Impacts



*This figure illustrates the duration of impacts: red indicates textbooks' publication period, blue their period of use, and green their period of influence on graduates. Before 1900, many geography textbooks were overtly racist. Some of those books were probably used through the 1930s and so influenced graduates' beliefs and attitudes through the Twentieth Century. Starting about 1900, geography textbooks presented pseudoscientific claims about the superiority of European countries and the benefits of colonialism. During the second half of the Twentieth Century, textbooks tended to emphasize multiculturalism, and some recent curricula are anti-racist.*

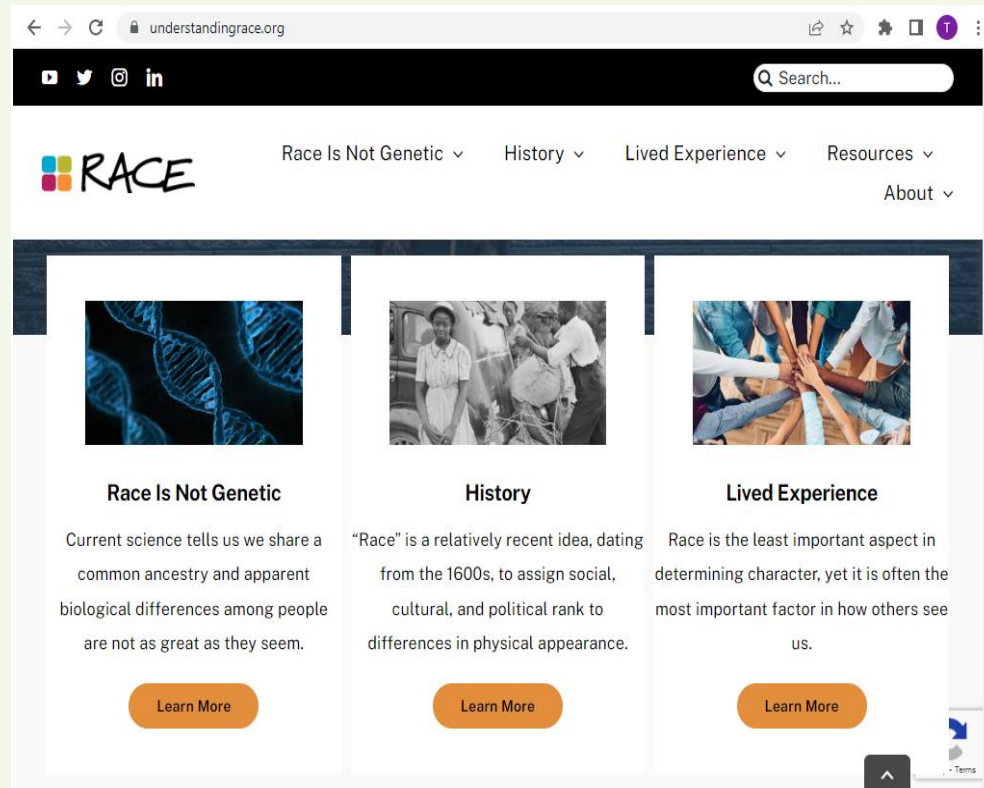


# *1955 Texas Geography Class*



# Reforms

The American Anthropological Association's art exhibit and website, Race: Are We So Different? critically examines the treatment of race at various times and locations, and provides resources for improving our understanding race and overcoming prejudices.





# Conclusions

- During the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries school geography textbooks were an important source of information about foreign lands and peoples. It is enlightening to examine how those books described race and culture, and consider how they affected common knowledge and policies.
- Most geography textbooks published before 1900 were overtly racist; they categorized people by race, which were ranked according to “stages of society,” from *savage* and *barbarous* to *civilized* and *enlightened*. Unsurprisingly, North American textbooks ranked Europeans highest and described other races and cultures as intellectually and morally inferior.
- These descriptions changed over time. Textbooks published from 1900 to 1940 had less overt racial hierarchies but still emphasized the superiority of western institutions and the benefits that colonialization provided to natives.
- Textbooks published after 1940 often provided positive stories about foreign people, cultures and immigrants, and some encouraged students to critically analyze racism and colonialism.

# *More Conclusions*

- Similar patterns are found in history books, which incorporated racist geographic concepts.
- These messages left a durable impact on people's attitudes about race and culture. Current discrimination is, to some degree, a legacy of geography textbook lessons which portrayed non-whites as culturally, intellectually and morally inferior, and therefore dangerous and unproductive.
- Recent academic publications critically analyzes these racist and colonialist messages, and provides guidance for introducing anti-racist and anti-colonialist concepts to students.





# Full Report

## Racism and Colonialism in Geography Textbooks, 1840s to 1950s ([www.vtppi.org/rcgb.pdf](http://www.vtppi.org/rcgb.pdf))

**Abstract:** Geography textbooks introduce children to foreign lands and people. They are considered scientific and authoritative, and leave a durable legacy on our world views. This study analyzes descriptions of race and culture from typical British and North American grade school geography textbooks published between 1847 and 1955. It reprints selected texts and images, analyzes how their narratives changed over time, and discusses their impacts.

Early books categorized race and culture using methods modelled after biological taxonomies, giving them a veneer of scientific objectivity. They identified various races (European [White], Asiatic [Yellow], African [Black], Malayan [Brown] and American Indian [Red]), which were categorized according to “stages of society” (savage, barbarous, half-civilized, civilized and enlightened). They were overtly racist (they claimed that White races are superior) and colonialist (they claimed that European imperialism was benevolent and beneficial). This allowed Whites to feel superior to other peoples and supported colonialist policies. Racist and colonialist narratives declined over time and later books promoted inclusivity and multiculturalism.

**Racism and Colonialism in Geography Textbooks, 1840s to 1950s**

13 February 2023  
By Todd Litman ([litman@vtppi.org](mailto:litman@vtppi.org))



*A geography class at the multi-racial Hampton Institute in Virginia, 1899. Most geography textbooks at the time contained pseudoscientific racist narratives. (Frances Benjamin Johnston, <https://bit.ly/3CUeEQ3>)*

**Abstract**  
Geography textbooks introduce children to foreign lands and people. They are considered scientific and authoritative, and leave a durable legacy on our world views. This study analyzes descriptions of race and culture from typical British and North American grade school geography textbooks published between 1847 and 1955. It reprints selected texts and images, analyzes how their narratives changed over time, and discusses their impacts. Early books categorized race and culture using methods modelled after biological taxonomies, giving them a veneer of scientific objectivity. They identified various races (European [White], Asiatic [Yellow], African [Black], Malayan [Brown] and American Indian [Red]), which were categorized according to “stages of society” (savage, barbarous, half-civilized, civilized and enlightened). They were overtly racist (they claimed that White races are superior) and colonialist (they claimed that European imperialism was benevolent and beneficial). This allowed Whites to feel superior to other peoples and supported colonialist policies. Racist and colonialist narratives declined over time and later books promoted racial inclusivity and multiculturalism.

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(<https://aaq.secure-platform.com/aaq2023/solicitations/39/sessiongallery/B523/application/21639>)