Feeling US history

School districts and legislatures aren’t just challenging textbooks and curricula. They’re challenging feelings.

by Amy Frykholm in the July 13, 2022 issue

(Source images: Getty / Unsplash)

When I was a child in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, my favorite place in the world was the public library. I read my way through every book in the young adult section, but my favorites, and the most memorable, were fiction books that contended in some serious way with US history. By this I mean books like *Jubilee*, written by poet Margaret Walker, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, by Elizabeth George Speare, and the now sometimes banned and maligned *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* by Mildred Taylor, which rocked me with deep feeling. Those were the books on the shelf in that section of the library in the early 1980s, and I can still remember the look and feel of them in my hands, their smell, what it felt like to carry them home to read them. I cared about them both for their own sake and because they connected me to a

bigger understanding of myself and my people.

These books took me imaginatively into the lives of people whose existences and histories were very different from my own but who were connected to me by the fact that we were part of one thing called the United States of America. The experience of reading like that was absorptive and disruptive. I became the characters in those books. I lived through and alongside them. When I came out the other end, I had deep feelings about the lives that those people lived—real or imagined. I was shaped and transformed by feeling.

These feelings matter, because they shape what Claudia Rankine calls our “racial imaginary.” These are the images, understandings, and subtle definitions that we carry out into our social encounters, and especially our encounters with the other.

But the kinds of feelings that I had as a child and a reader are being challenged in school districts and legislatures across the country. Legislators, it turns out, would prefer that children not feel about history the way I did, that they not be disrupted. For those who are trying to maintain the status quo, feelings can be a problem. Art risks evoking feelings beyond the approved ones of patriotic sentimentality: real feelings, uncomfortable feelings, feelings that spur change.

In 2021, the Texas state legislature passed a bill intended to direct the teaching of history in public schools. The bill aims to resist understandings of US history that have begun to grow in the wake of both the 1619 Project and the Black Lives Matter movement. In history classrooms of the past, racism and slavery were imagined as, in the bill’s words, “deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality.” In the growing, more challenging understanding, both racism and slavery are understood to be institutional and systemic, shaping not only individual perceptions but also structures—structures that were never fully dismantled. Understood this way, racism and slavery cannot be mere deviations. They were baked into the cake.

This is the idea that cannot be tolerated by legislators like the ones who passed Texas’s new law and by school boards and legislatures all over the country who have joined in a frenzy of banning critical race theory, as they refer to the idea in shorthand, from school districts and classrooms. Study of structural racism has to be rejected at all costs because it is a strong challenge to both the status quo and the

shallow feelings of patriotism that US history classes are often designed to stimulate.

Feelings play a surprisingly large role in these legislators' rhetoric. The Texas law expresses, in several different forms, the fear that White people will be blamed rather than praised for the realities of US history. Even the line "the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality" captures a desire for children to feel a vague pride when they hear phrases like "founding principles" and "liberty and equality." This is part of the racial imaginary, and it seeks to shape the emotional lives of children.

But this logic culminates in a prohibition against other kinds of feeling. An individual, the Texas law says, "should [not] feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex." This concern for the feelings of children—and we have to acknowledge the subtext here, the feelings of White children most especially—strikes me as an odd thing to try to legislate and an odd concern for legislators to have.

My first instinct is to wonder about the feelings of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children in these classrooms where their experiences and histories have been either denigrated or erased. When I was looking up the bill for the purposes of writing about it, I was taken aback by Section 28.002 (h-2) (1) (C), which contains the phrase "the teaching of the history of Native Americans"—and which is now crossed out. In this and other places, the bill seems to say, *If we can't tell these stories in the blame-absolving way we've always told them, let's not tell them at all.*

Rankine and Beth Loffreda note that racism often does its most insidious work "by not manifesting itself clearly and indisputably, and by undermining one's own ability to feel certain of exactly what forces are in play." Silence, they say, has the effect of doubling down "the force of race—you feel it, you feel the injury, the racist address, and then you question yourself for feeling it. You wonder if you've made your own prison."

If US history is real to me in any way, it is because of my self-education through art and through feeling—not because of any questions I answered at the end of any sections of any textbook approved by a legislature. But what were my feelings? They were in fact the "discomfort, guilt, anguish" that the Texas legislature is so worried about. You can't live alongside a person in the midst of struggle and not feel those

things. Did I feel them “because of my race and sex”? Yes, in a very real way I did. I knew my people weren’t slaves or sharecroppers. I knew my Puritan heritage was complicated, even if I couldn’t have told you all the reasons why. Did these books make me question my place in US society? Yes. Did they disrupt easy narratives of the goodness of our progress? Yes. Did they damage me irreparably? No. Through the experience of empathy and the recognition of difference, these stories built and shaped me. They made me.

The theme of children’s feelings is currently running through a political discourse broader than just laws about history curricula. It comes up frequently in discussions about banning books. Texas state representative Matt Krause echoed the Texas bill’s language—language that has become boilerplate for a movement—when he made a list last October of 850 books that he said “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex.” He encouraged schools to self-censor these books before the legislature got around to doing it for them.

When politicians talk about the feelings of children in such rigid and formulaic ways, it might appear that they are not actually concerned about those feelings. When I first read the law, I was tempted to dismiss the word feeling because of my cynicism about legislators’ motives. Oh, I thought, so now you care about the feelings of children?

But feelings about history matter deeply, and the feelings of children matter even more. We are at a crucial juncture about how we will tell the story of our country going forward. It matters that we get this telling right. As they shape the future of our country, our children might be able to draw from better accounts of history. They might be able to give an honest assessment of the tools and materials available and ask, “What do we want to build here?”

A diverse society requires empathy. Without it, it is a society that contains the seeds of its own undoing. And feelings are essential to the development of empathy. There are many ways to be shaped for the crucial role of empathy in the understanding of US society. All of them—art, music, literature, theater, biography, essays, and more—include the experience of enacting and absorbing history through feeling.

For me, because of where I lived and how I lived, this experience was very individualistic—a child alone in a library. But it is easy to imagine spaces where

similar encounters and better ones can take place as children learn from other children in diverse settings. If discussions of books that address racism and oppression are banned from classrooms, then we are denied a key place for the kind of encounters that might allow for the transformation we long for. Once that experience of empathy has been had, once that boundary in the self has been crossed, there is no going back. Feeling is that powerful.

Maybe the legislators know this. Maybe they want to keep feeling out of classrooms for this very reason. If we keep the deep work of learning history out of the classroom, then the system can continue on as before, unchallenged.

I am not saying that feeling is the only thing that matters to learning. Textbooks and curricula matter. They are symbols of what the adult world cares about, what the adult world is interested in passing on. But they are not the most powerful tools in our transformation toolbox. For those of us interested in moving forward with a more comprehensive story of US history from 1619 to 1776 to the Civil War to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 and beyond, the question of feeling is imperative.

In a society of diverse individuals and communities, we need to be able to hear each other, to have knowledge and care for each other's histories and stories, to see ourselves as united by a common vision of respect and mutual care that is rooted in an honest reckoning. We are a long way from accomplishing this, of course. One might argue that this vision is utopian and that we have actually been moving backwards, as evidenced by the new law in Texas.

But I would argue that those of us who care about the teaching and learning of US history have been too dismissive of the question of feeling, even as we have argued passionately about which facts matter. If you want to go somewhere, it helps to know what your most viable means are of getting there. I would argue that feeling is one of our more viable means.

And feeling is largely impervious to legislation. Yes, history is written by the victors, and White legislators in the Texas legislature are trying to be those victors. But our feeling for history is ultimately far more powerful than any fact in any textbook. Our country's past experience demonstrates that while the struggle is long, history actually belongs to those who keep telling the story in such a way that children and adults can feel it. You can ban books all you like, you can tell teachers what students

shouldn’t feel, but you can’t actually stop them from feeling it.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Feeling history.”