

Natalie Vandercook

*The Alamo:
A Battle for Interpretation from 1836 to the Present*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the public memory of the 1836 Battle of the Alamo. It analyzes historical accounts from the 1800s to the mid-1900s, as well as textbooks, museum guides, movies, and monuments. The author argues that turning the Battle of the Alamo into folklore through romanticism and racism has contributed to an ahistorical narrative that has impacted the past and continues to have repercussions in the present.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; U.S. history; Mexico; San Antonio; Texas Revolution; Battle of the Alamo (1836); Mexican-American War; racism; national identity; public memory*

Introduction

In the early hours of March 6, 1836, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's final assault in the Battle of the Alamo crushed the Texan defenders' last hope for survival.¹ Tensions had been rising for some time between the Texans who had migrated to Texas for land, the Tejanos who were the Mexicans living in Texas, and the Mexican government which had recently gained independence from Spain (1821).² Mexico opened Texas up to both Anglo-Americans and Mexicans through the Colonization Law that allowed for settlers to claim and own the land.³ However, the Mexican government created stipulations for immigrating into Texas. The main restriction that caused tension stemmed from the fact that slavery was illegal in Texas.⁴ Nevertheless, Anglo-Americans brought their slaves into Texan territory. Slaves had been essential to the economic success of the southern region of the United States since the time of the British colonies. Because the eastern part of Texas had fertile land needed for cotton farming, it was of high interest for many American farmers. This became one of the central motivations for Americans desiring to migrate to Texas.⁵ As time passed, Anglo-Americans continued to break Mexico's laws; thus, on April 6, 1830, Mexico passed a law that ended colonization by Anglo-Americans and made it illegal for them to enter Texan territory.⁶ Even after the law of April 6, 1830, Americans by

¹ Lon Tinkle, *13 Days to Glory: The Siege of the Alamo* (New York City: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1958), 198.

² Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 93.

³ John Sales and Henry Sales, eds., *Early Laws of Texas: General Laws from 1836 to 1879*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: The Gilbert Book Co. 1891), 42.

⁴ Gary Clay Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2005), 83.

⁵ Anderson, *Conquest of Texas*, 82.

⁶ Anderson, *Conquest of Texas*, 79.

the thousands continued to illegally migrate into Texas.⁷ As this continued, many Americans then living in Texas felt as though Texas should become independent from Mexico, since this would allow Texans to pursue their economic goals while not facing any restrictions from the Mexican government.⁸ To address this problem, the Mexican government, led by Santa Anna, sent soldiers to stabilize and enforce order in the territory.⁹ In response, the majority of Texans, as well as some Tejanos, began to fight for Texan independence, which eventually led to the siege of the Alamo.¹⁰ The Alamo is located in Bexar, modern-day San Antonio, Texas.¹¹ The Spanish had originally constructed the Alamo as a Catholic mission and fortified it into a defensive compound. As tensions arose between the Mexican government and the Texans who wanted independence, two hundred men, all of whom had volunteered to fight, met at the Alamo to defend it.¹² Key volunteers included Colonel James Bowie and David Crockett, who desired independence from Mexico and were willing to fight for Texan independence.¹³ The Battle of the Alamo was a decisive moment, especially in Texan history, as it was the prelude to the eventual U.S. annexation of the territory of Texas (1845) and the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).¹⁴

The Alamo and the events surrounding it played a key role in shaping the culture and the political foundation of the United States as we know them today. In this context, it is crucial to understand that many studies on and interpretations of the subject are heavily influenced by the public and by people's subjective opinions. Therefore, this article will be using different types of sources to achieve a balanced analysis of the historical events of the Alamo. The majority of period's primary sources come from the accounts of the Mexican soldiers, since there were very few Texans who survived the battle. One of the most notable among these was Francisco Bercera, a Mexican sergeant who fought at the Alamo. His account contains a detailed recollection of the battle and the

⁷ Alwyn Barr, *Texans in Revolt: The Battle for San Antonio, 1835* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 2.

⁸ David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989; first published 1987), 15.

⁹ Barr, *Texans in Revolt*, 4.

¹⁰ Virgil E. Baugh, *Rendezvous at the Alamo: Highlight in the Lives of Bowie, Crockett, and Travis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985; first published 1960), 186.

¹¹ Barr, *Texans in Revolt*, vii.

¹² Raúl A. Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Identity in San Antonio, 1821-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 154.

¹³ Charles Ramsdell, "The Storming of the Alamo," in *The American Heritage Book of Great Adventures of the Old West*, introduction by Archibald Hanna, Jr. (New York: American Heritage Press, 1969), 107-126, here 117.

¹⁴ Richard R. Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 32.

politics of the period.¹⁵ Recorded in 1875, the book depicts events that Becerra experienced as a Mexican sergeant from just before 1835 up until the two subsequent decades.¹⁶ Two of the most quoted survivors are a slave, only known as Joe, and Mrs. Almaron Dickinson who is the most cited source. However, their accounts of the actual battle are less useful, since they both hid for the duration of the confrontation.¹⁷ Due to the lack of reliable primary sources related to the Alamo, people's accounts embellished the facts to fit a narrative acceptable to them and their agenda. Some of the sources that changed the history of the Alamo are the ones to be examined here. Earlier writings on the topic reveal a transformation of the men who posthumously became heroes as they had died honorably and fought to protect Texan independence.¹⁸ Sources from the 1900s onward suggest that the folklore surrounding the Alamo had become accepted as fact, as evident in both popular literature and scholarly books.¹⁹ This article will also examine how the Alamo is portrayed in popular movies, such as John Wayne's *The Alamo* (1960)²⁰ and John Lee Hancock's *The Alamo* (2004).²¹

There is a vast array of scholarship on the Battle of the Alamo, since it is considered a turning point in U.S. history. It was not until the later twentieth century that scholars began to look more critically at the stories surrounding the history of the Alamo. Holly B. Brear was one of the first historians to analyze why America has accepted some of these Alamo fictions as fact.²² Brear's 1995 study explains how the Alamo became a myth that is central to the Texan identity. As a result, anything that challenges this legacy is viewed as an attack on Texan history.²³ Richard R. Flores (2002) has expanded upon the points originally presented by Brear and analyzes the way in which the memory of the event has shifted in accordance with the general public's accepted version.²⁴ Another historian, James E. Crisp (2005), a native Texan, has studied people's aversion to changing their understanding of the Alamo's history: Crisp examines

¹⁵ Francisco Becerra, *A Mexican Sergeant's Recollections of the Alamo & San Jacinto, as Told to John S. Ford in 1875*, introduction by Dan Kilgore (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1980), 20.

¹⁶ Becerra, *A Mexican Sergeant's Recollections*, 15.

¹⁷ Becerra, *A Mexican Sergeant's Recollections*, 5.

¹⁸ Burt Hirschfeld, *After the Alamo: The Story of the Mexican War* (New York: Julian Messner, 1966), 98.

¹⁹ Perry McWilliams, "The Alamo Story: From Fact to Fable," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15, no. 3 (1978): 221-233, here 225.

²⁰ *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne (1960; United Artists/The Alamo Company/Batjac Productions).

²¹ *The Alamo*, directed by John Lee Hancock (2004; Touchstone Pictures/Imagine Entertainment).

²² Holly B. Brear, *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 1.

²³ Brear, *Inherit the Alamo*, 132.

²⁴ Flores, *Remembering the Alamo*, 2.

how the Texan educational system has perpetuated the legends and myths associated with the Alamo.²⁵ This article will evaluate how and why the actual events of the Alamo have been re-shaped by the public and its perceptions of what happened.

In the context of popular history, this article argues that the turning of the Battle of the Alamo into folklore through romanticism and racism helped shape an ahistorical narrative rather than an accurate account of this historic event, which impacts both the past and the present. The history of the Alamo was romanticized due to its importance for the Texan identity and the men who were transformed into American heroes.²⁶ Racism was one of the most critical factors in altering the history of the Alamo: it led to the generalization of the good Americans versus the bad Mexicans, the promotion of Manifest Destiny, and the justification for seizing territory.²⁷ The resulting ahistorical account of the Alamo has not only been accepted as fact for decades but continues to influence our culture and American identity today.

I. The Romanticizing of History into Legend

Most people would agree that the Alamo and its story are an essential part of U.S. history, especially with regard to the foundation of Texas. It has become a cornerstone of the Texan identity. This identity, however, was based on the romanticizing of the story of the Alamo. As a result, the Battle of the Alamo became less of an accurate historical event and more of an over-simplified narrative that allowed and justified white American agendas. This strict black-and-white interpretation painted the Texans as the clear heroes, leaving the Mexicans and the Tejanos with the role of the villains. Thus, the story of the Alamo and its key characters was transformed into a legend filled with American heroes that excludes any negative portrayal, let alone critical analysis that went against the popular narrative.

The narrative of the Alamo was essential to the building of the Texan identity as it was considered the very beginning of the state, or Republic, itself. The importance of the Alamo is taught to children from an early age, both in school and at home. Throughout Texas, the state curriculum is one of the major leading sources in instilling the narrative of the Alamo as essential. Text books and educational comics such as the *Texas History Movies* (originally published between 1926 and 1928 in Dallas newspapers) have taught children the history of the Alamo through a heavily filtered and biased lens.²⁸ In fact, the *Texas History*

²⁵ James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176.

²⁶ Brear, *Inherit the Alamo*, 138.

²⁷ Robert Anthony Soza, "Denying Genocide: 'America's' Mythology of Nation, The Alamo, and the Historiography of Denial" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 28.

²⁸ Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo*, 7. See also Mike Zambrano, Jr., "Texas History Movies," article, [Texas State Historical Association](#), accessed May 22, 2019.

Movies, a collection of educational comics on Texas history published in book format, were a part of the seventh-grade Texan curriculum from the 1920s up until the late 1960s.²⁹ The majority of the comics focuses on the Anglo-Texans, their fight for the land, and their success. In addition, they pay special attention to the frontiersmen and adventurers who are glorified.³⁰ While it celebrates Texans, its portrayal of Mexicans and Tejanos is often filtered down to a racist caricature, and their motives for fighting against Texans are oversimplified as merely evil intentions. Mexicans, especially those in government positions, are represented as dimwitted, easily fooled, and prone to unprompted violence. The comics gloss over why the Mexican government wanted the Americans to stop immigrating, and why Mexico fought against those starting the fight for Texan independence. It portrays the defenders of the Alamo in a sympathetic light, even going so far as to state incorrect numbers and facts.³¹ As a result, the *Texas History Movies* created a romanticized version of Texan history. The romanticized history of the Alamo is represented as Texan history. These educational comics were central to shaping and instilling a Texan identity in the students.

In addition to identity being instilled by the school system, the Texan heritage was also promoted through the tourism industry, on both a private and a governmental level. For example, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas originally wanted the chapel, the only remaining part of the Alamo, to be fully restored.³² In the end, they won against the local investors who wanted the mission to be gone. The Daughters of the Republic restored the chapel to a highly idealized version of what it might have looked like in 1836.³³ Their website asserts that the chapel was restored to preserve historical accuracy; yet, the website also highlights that the Alamo was remodeled as a “memorial to Alamo defenders” and that the chapel is a “shrine” and a “holy site.”³⁴ A balanced and accurate account can be distorted when the goal is to emphasize and glorify specific aspects of a person or event. In this case, the Alamo historical site serves

²⁹ “New Texas History Movies,” book announcement, [Texas State Historical Association](#), accessed May 22, 2019.

³⁰ Félix D. Almaráz, Jr., Joe M. Cardenas, George A. Juarez, and Constance McQueen, eds., *Texas History Movies* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association and Texas Educational Association, 1986; first published 1974). It should be noted that this 1974/1986 is “redacted,” meaning that offensive text has been changed. There is now also a new rendition of the *Texas History Movies*: Jack Jackson, *The New Texas History Movies* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

³¹ Almaráz et al., *Texas History Movies*, 8.

³² Claudia N. Campeanu, “Tourism, Modernity, and Heritage Production at the Alamo,” in *NA-Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 30, ed. Punam Anand Keller and Dennis W. Rook (Valdosta: Association for Consumer Research, 2002): 357-360, here 357.

³³ Campeanu, “Tourism, Modernity, and Heritage Production,” 357.

³⁴ The Alamo, “Buildings,” *The Alamo: The Mission, the Battle, the Legend*, [The Alamo](#), accessed May 22, 2018.

as a tribute to Alamo defenders, while neglecting the actual structure and history of the building.³⁵ Tourists and visitors of the Alamo encounter the romanticized version which they can accept as fact. This romanticized version's impact on the Texan identity is still seen today. Arguments that negatively challenge the popular history are vigorously opposed. For example, James E. Crisp, author of *Sleuthing the Alamo*, received a considerable amount of hate mail and threats while researching for his book.³⁶ So, the romanticized account of the Alamo is taught from an early age; it is strongly present throughout different aspects of life in Texas; and it critically shapes the Texan identity that is present today.

The romanticized history of the Alamo extended far beyond Texan identity. One of its far-reaching implications was the transformation of the Texan defenders into legends. William Barret Travis, James Bowie, and especially David Crockett are among the most popular of the defenders who have become more myth than men with a considerable portion of their accomplishments fabricated decades after their death. William Barret Travis was the commander of the volunteers at the Alamo in 1836.³⁷ His final letter was a call for reinforcements: "I call on you in the name of liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character to come to our aid [...]. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier."³⁸ Travis wrote this letter knowing that he would either be captured or killed, and he used the situation to elicit a passionate response from the Americans and other Texans. In literature, Travis is often regarded as a valiant hero who gave his life for Texas. While he did give his life up for his cause, his story is immensely exaggerated and glorified. He was one of the many who had migrated to Texas illegally. In 1833, he had left his wife and child in Alabama in an opportunistic move to try to regain political and economic prestige.³⁹

Two other key figures, James Bowie and David Crockett, became legends after their death at the Alamo. Popular literature and media have transformed their death into a tragic, heroic event. There are a number of different and conflicting stories of these heroes' demise that have long been accepted as fact due to popular media changing the narrative to fit a publicly accepted vision. One such account describes David Crockett dying in his bed as he fights off the enemy, using his two dueling pistols, and then killing several Mexicans with his

³⁵ Holly B. Brear, "We Run the Alamo and You Don't: Alamo Battles of Ethnicity and Gender," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 299-318, here 301.

³⁶ Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo*, x.

³⁷ Baugh, *Rendezvous at the Alamo*, 183.

³⁸ William Barret Travis, quoted in N.a., "William Barret Travis," in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Vol. 15, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2004), 292-293.

³⁹ Anderson, *Conquest of Texas*, 81.

knife.⁴⁰ In actuality, Crockett was very sick, had only one gun at his side, which he did not use, and he died in his bed after being shot.⁴¹ The transforming of ordinary men into legends allows for the substitution of fact with fiction, so that the legend only consists of the positive. Yet, the vast majority of men who had migrated to Texas, especially after the law of 1830, had done so to escape their debts or the law. It was common for men to sign letters, paperwork, and documents with "G.T.T." (Gone to Texas) as an informal declaration.⁴² During the early 1800s, Texas was viewed as a territory that criminals ran to in order to avoid prosecution.⁴³ During the mid-1800s, the background story of criminal fugitives and the growing number of Americans illegally in the Texan territory was downplayed. This was because America realized the benefit of taking the Texan territory for both cotton production and the added political benefit of having another slave state.⁴⁴ Even today, most people are not aware of these less than heroic details that do not fit within the romanticized ideal of American heroes fighting for Texan independence.

The main legendary figures of the Alamo were not just idealized through literature, but also through monuments, for example the Alamo Cenotaph of 1940, located in San Antonio and built to honor these men.⁴⁵ Titled "The Spirit of Sacrifice," the Alamo Cenotaph only depicts the Anglo-American men who fought at the Alamo and was sculpted out of marble to be larger than life.⁴⁶ This visual portrayal of the defenders only identifies Travis, Bowie, and Crockett, while the others remain unnamed.⁴⁷ Yet, highlighting only these men ignores the complex context of the battle. The transformation of the men into legends reinforces the romanticized narrative by covering up the factual history to make way for a highly idealized fiction. Many of the defenders' words became memorialized as reflecting the fervent beliefs held by the defenders of the Alamo. These ideals of freedom and identity were carried on into the twentieth century. This was evident during the Cold War. Patriotic American identity played a role in counteracting communism which, as many people believed, was threatening democracy. To combat the spread of communism, American heroes

⁴⁰ Robert Edmond Alter, *Two Sieges of the Alamo* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 177.

⁴¹ J. Frank Dobie, Mody C. Boatright, and Harry H. Ransom, eds., *In the Shadow of History*, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society, Vol. 15 (Detroit: Folklore Associates Press, 1971; first published 1939), 48.

⁴² Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, 15.

⁴³ Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, 15.

⁴⁴ David M. Vigness, *The Revolutionary Decades: The Saga of Texas, 1810-1836* (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1965), 127.

⁴⁵ Dreanna L. Belden, Alamo Centotaph, "The Spirit of Sacrifice," side view with sculpture of Defenders, photograph, May 3, 2005, University of North Texas Libraries, [The Portal to Texas History](#), accessed May 22, 2019.

⁴⁶ Belden, Alamo Centotaph.

⁴⁷ Belden, Alamo Centotaph.

were placed on even higher pedestals. People thought it was important to celebrate their heroes, including those of the Alamo.⁴⁸ Anyone challenging the spirit of the American identity could be viewed as a communist. This further cemented Alamo fiction into fact. Overall, the words, actions, and death of the defenders of the Alamo not only inspired others at the time of the battle, but it has played a role in politics and for American identity well into the present.

Almost from the beginning, the history of the Alamo has been viewed through a filter: anything that does not fit within the narrowly defined parameters of accepted history is rejected. In doing so, this historical event was romanticized, turned the defenders of the Alamo into legends, and promoted a Texan identity that focused only on strength and bravery.

II. The Pervasiveness of Racism

Throughout the recorded history of the Alamo, Mexicans and Tejanos have been vilified and discriminated against by Anglo-Americans creating a false narrative to fit their agendas. Popular media and literature have portrayed the Texans as a group who were righteous and above reproach. The result was a fabricated narrative in which Mexicans appeared in the role of villains. In addition, all other ethnic groups were treated with the same prejudice that resulted in racist stereotypes. This process of vilification of the non-white ethnic groups helped lend credibility to beliefs such as Manifest Destiny. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny called for white Protestant men to spread Christianity to those who were deemed culturally and racially inferior, and to extend their civilization to new lands, even if these lands were already occupied.⁴⁹

The narrative of the Alamo, especially in literature and the media, falls prey to racism as the white narrative attempts to justify the defenders' actions and motives. The Texan defenders' plight as the underdogs led to their heroic status. Racism allowed the defenders to be seen as the victims of an aggressive enemy, the Mexicans. Most media portrayals of the Alamo only show Anglo-American men defending the chapel, when in reality that was far from the truth. When defining the enemy, it was easier to have a clear division of "us versus them," but having Mexicans on both sides of the fight complicated the matter. The Alamo was defended by both Anglo-Texans and Tejanos.⁵⁰ The majority of the two hundred defenders came from what is called the "southern backcountry."⁵¹ These defenders were Americans from some of the most southern regions of America, and they had come to Texas to answer the call for the fight over Texan

⁴⁸ Flores, *Remembering the Alamo*, 121.

⁴⁹ Armando Alonzo, "A Brief History of Texas Rancheros in South Texas, 1730-1900," in Donald Willett and Stephan Curley, eds., *Invisible Texans: Women and Minorities in Texas History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 44-60, here 53.

⁵⁰ Mike Milford, "The Rhetorical Evolution of the Alamo," *Communication Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2013): 113-130, here 117.

⁵¹ Milford, "Rhetorical Evolution of the Alamo," 117.

independence in hopes of economic and political gain.⁵² Of the two hundred defenders, only eleven were actually from or living in Texas.⁵³ Furthermore, only two of the eleven had Anglo-American surnames, while the other nine were Tejanos.⁵⁴ Most literature on the Alamo leaves out the fact that the majority of defenders were not from Texas or living there, and that the few that did live there were mostly Tejanos. Instead, the narrative emphasizes that the Alamo was defended by Anglo-Texans against Mexicans. Omitting the Tejanos from the historical accounts reinforced the process of “othering” the Mexicans.

Another way in which Mexicans were vilified was through the language used to describe them. Most books claimed to take a neutral stance when discussing the history of the Alamo, yet the majority did not. Many books contained racist beliefs and stereotypes. This racism is inherent in a range of literary sources ranging from children’s books to scholarly works. For example, a 1964 children’s book claimed that the Mexican people were fighting against the peace set up by Anglo-Americans, and that this justified why the Mexicans had to be dealt with “ruthlessly.”⁵⁵ Changing the past by adding racist sentiments negatively affected both the past and the present. For example, historian James E. Crisp recalls how significantly the *Texas History Movies* impacted his understanding of Texas history and his perspective on race when he was a child.⁵⁶ His only interaction with Mexicans and other minority groups came through such books and popular films.⁵⁷ Crisp, like many other white Texan children in his day, had a preconceived notion, based on racist portrayals, of what other ethnicities were like. Such negative representation had far-reaching effects. Richard R. Flores, a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, recounts his experience of visiting the Alamo when he was a child. A school friend at the end of the tour said to him, “You killed them! You and the other ‘Reskins’!”⁵⁸ Reactions by children and adults alike show how racism, when represented as factual history, negatively influences and affects lives.

One of the biggest contributing factors to the racism seen in the popular history of the Alamo was the concept of Manifest Destiny. During the early 1800s, Manifest Destiny had a strong hold in American politics and society, as expansionism was seen as the solution to America’s problems. This also applied to Americans looking westward, since the Texas territory held rich farm land for

⁵² Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 48.

⁵³ James McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart: The Texas Tendency in Politics* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2004), 18.

⁵⁴ McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 18.

⁵⁵ Henry Castor, *The First Book of the War with Mexico* (New York: Franklin Watts Inc., 1964), 56.

⁵⁶ Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo*, 17.

⁵⁷ Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo*, 20.

⁵⁸ Flores, *Remembering the Alamo*, xiii.

cotton. It was occupied by a small number of Tejanos and Mexicans, as well as multiple Native American tribes, all of whom were considered not to be the true owners of the land, since they did not occupy it in a way that was acceptable to Americans.⁵⁹ A major component of Manifest Destiny was religion, Protestantism in particular. In the 1830s, the people in Bexar (San Antonio), as in the rest of Texas and Mexico, predominantly practiced Roman Catholicism.⁶⁰ Protestant Americans believed that they had the God-given right to go out, convert, and rule over those of other faiths, including Catholics.⁶¹ As a result, they saw their actions as justified and proceeded to enter the Texas territory under the banner of missionary work to reform those they considered religiously inferior. This ultimately led to the belief that the Tejanos and Mexicans were also culturally inferior, since religion was considered a significant factor in the development of culture. Another critical aspect of Manifest Destiny was race. Manifest Destiny justified racism in that it promised settlers that it was their right to civilize non-Anglo-Americans.⁶² This was evident to people and governments outside of the United States. Luis de Onís, the Spanish diplomat who negotiated the cession of Florida to the United States, noted that, “[t]hey consider themselves superior to the rest of mankind” and “destined one day to become the most sublime colossus of human power.”⁶³ Onís’s observation revealed the attitudes held by both Americans and white Texans at the time. This way of thinking seen in the 1800s carried on for generations and was used to legitimize efforts to assert dominion over others.

The racist belief of white supremacy, as observed by Onís, became the justification for the Texans to confiscate land from Mexico. According to Manifest Destiny, it was the duty of Anglo-Americans to expand, especially into areas owned and controlled by those considered racially inferior. During the nineteenth century, the idea of Manifest Destiny held dominance in American politics and among the general population, since it provided a rationale for territorial expansion.⁶⁴ This was one of the causes for the fight over the Alamo and the Mexican-American War. The assumptions of Manifest Destiny allowed Anglo-Americans to migrate to Texas, take cheap land from native people, and bring slavery into Texas. In addition, men immigrated in order to escape debts and jail in other parts of North America.⁶⁵ Ironically, instead of the Anglo-Americans “civilizing” the land and its people, they moved there illegally and

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Conquest of Texas*, 153.

⁶⁰ McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 36.

⁶¹ McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 57.

⁶² McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 36.

⁶³ Luis de Onís, quoted in Eugene C. Barker, *Mexico and Texas, 1821-1835* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965; first published 1928), 7.

⁶⁴ Castor, *First Book of the War with Mexico*, 6.

⁶⁵ McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 14.

accomplished few of the goals of Manifest Destiny, apart from accumulating territory. Manifest Destiny was used as a thinly veiled excuse to steal land from non-Anglo-Americans. Most of these unflattering facts are excluded from the popular narrative, yet the popular narrative often goes out of its way to describe Mexicans and Tejanos as the “brutish” and “savage” ones.⁶⁶ Manifest Destiny and the distortion of the Alamo’s history were frequently used to legitimize and reinforce racism directed toward Mexicans and the seizing of the Texas territory.

Overall, the history of the Alamo has been misrepresented through literature and the media, which in turn has shaped the way the public perceives race and identity. Popular media and academics alike have created a portrait in which Anglo-Americans were the heroes in the Battle of the Alamo. Additionally, the ideas of Manifest Destiny—pervasive in religion, culture, and politics—were used to justify racism. Tejanos and Mexicans, now considered inferior, needed to be enlightened. The racist stereotypes toward Tejanos and Mexicans has lasting consequences even today.

III. Twisting the Truth into an Ahistorical Narrative

In general, the history of the Alamo has been shaped by popular media and popular history to fit certain American biases and accepted perspectives, which has constructed a romanticized, racist, and ahistorical narrative that is now widely accepted as fact. Thus, over time, the general public has come to view fallacies, as seen in movies and read in both popular fiction and even some scholarly works, as historically accurate.

Movies have a considerable impact on our lives as they shape how we perceive people and events. Over two dozen films are based upon the events at the Alamo, and while the majority of them claim to be historically accurate, they tend to perpetuate racist stereotypes and glorify legends of the defenders.⁶⁷ Two of the most popular and influential Alamo movies are John Wayne’s *The Alamo* (1960)⁶⁸ and Disney’s *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1955).⁶⁹ John Wayne’s *The Alamo* features the story of the three main characters—Travis, Bowie, and Crockett—and the days leading up to their death at the Alamo. It fails to acknowledge Santa Anna’s offers for surrender and instead substitutes the narrative that the defenders at the Alamo were offered no other option but to fight to the death.⁷⁰ The film also shows the Alamo Mission being completely destroyed by the Mexicans at the end of the film, when in reality the building

⁶⁶ Alter, *Two Sieges of the Alamo*, 132.

⁶⁷ Don Graham, “Remembering the Alamo: The Story of the Texas Revolution in Popular Culture,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (July 1985): 35-66, here 39.

⁶⁸ *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne.

⁶⁹ *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, directed by Norman Foster (1955; Walt Disney Productions).

⁷⁰ *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne, scene 30: “The Longest Fight.”

remained largely standing.⁷¹ John Lee Hancock's *The Alamo* (2004), while produced much later than the majority of Alamo films, still falls prey to many historical inaccuracies.⁷² It does show and briefly explain that there were Tejanos fighting alongside the defenders, but it fails to stray from representing Santa Anna in an overtly vilified role along with the rest of his forces.⁷³ The high frequency of misrepresentation found in both movies, whether intentional or not, concretely contributes to perpetuating the popular history of the Alamo. While films are created to entertain and earn a profit, historical accuracy should not be replaced with fictional stories that are presented as the truth.

Just as movies influence our perceptions, popular literature also plays a large role in shaping our beliefs. Nonacademic literature frequently portrays the Alamo as an idealized event in American history, and the large volume of nonacademic literature written on the Alamo is evidence of the popularity and interest in the history of the Alamo. Even though much of the literature on the Alamo claims to be fictional or loosely based on the actual events, it still has a large effect on the public's perception of the historical event. Many of these writings were created during the twentieth century, and the intended readers were often children. One such book, *Remember the Alamo!* (1958), explains to the reader that the Texans had to fight for the Alamo to protect their freedom and property. The property that is referred to mainly consisted of their illegal slaves; however, this fact is continually left out of the story, as it does not portray the Texans in a good light and would suggest that their fight for independence included their right to own slaves.⁷⁴ Children's books wield a great deal of influence: they are often the first material children encounter on any given subject. This initial impression becomes the foundation of their beliefs and opinions on a subject, so the ahistorical narrative constructed in literature has a lasting impact. Even literature intended for adults can greatly influence our understanding of history. Crisp emphasizes how literature informs us of what is popularly accepted, whether it is the truth or not. He asserts, through analyzing Alamo literature, that the Alamo's status as an American icon has allowed for its history to be twisted into an ahistoricism.⁷⁵ Literature has tended to ignore aspects of Alamo history that portray America in a negative light, yet has never shied away from promoting the Alamo's awe-inspiring legends.

The third and most consequential factor in the ahistorical narrative of the Alamo are scholarly sources. Even academic books promote inaccuracies. Many of them claim to take a neutral stance on the subject; however, it is difficult to

⁷¹ *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne, scene 30: "The Longest Fight."

⁷² *The Alamo*, directed by John Lee Hancock.

⁷³ *The Alamo*, directed by John Lee Hancock.

⁷⁴ Robert Penn Warren, *Remember the Alamo!* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1958), 18.

⁷⁵ Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo*, 144.

take an unbiased stance when interpreting history. It is a dangerous position to claim to have no prejudices in hopes that the reader may then more readily accept the author's own views. For example, a recent author claims that the Texans were "burning in righteous outrage," suggesting that the author's bias has entered the interpretation of history.⁷⁶ Scholarly sources are usually considered factual and objective, without bias or agenda. However, much of the earlier research on the Alamo is filled with biases to the point that it is even admitted.⁷⁷ For example, a 1988 movie (*Alamo: The Price of Freedom*) shown at the "Alamo IMAX Theater at San Antonio's Rivercenter" proclaims in its opening, "Where the facts have failed, the myth of the Alamo survives."⁷⁸ This quote aptly summarizes the majority of older academic books: they claim to be scholarly and factual, yet they have allowed biases and myths to influence their works.

History will always be impacted by public opinion, and the Alamo is no exception. Its popular history is especially influenced by how it is portrayed in all forms of media. Such media often start out with some truth and then twist it to fit the people's agendas and biases. The presentation of false "facts" as truth distorts the history of the Alamo and leads people to more readily accept such falsities.

Conclusion

When one considers, in light of popular history, how the Battle of the Alamo reached mythic proportions, it is clear that romanticism and racism shaped this ahistorical narrative. Idealizing important figures and turning them into legends critically shaped the early formation of Texas identity. Racism was used to portray the Mexicans as the villains solely responsible for the conflict and to justify Manifest Destiny. The Battle of the Alamo shifted from a multi-causal, complex issue to an over-simplified ahistorical narrative.

Many twentieth-century scholarly sources examining the Battle of the Alamo have helped perpetuate the myth and distortions that many people believe to be fact. It is important that Americans today understand the complexity of the events leading up to the Mexican-American War in order to not reinforce stereotypes. More research is needed to understand how our American mythology plays a role in our current immigration policies. How strongly does "Remember the Alamo!" today distort our understanding and response to the needs of Mexicans and other minorities? Identifying our prejudices can lead to correcting and re-educating the public.

⁷⁶ Andrew Galloway, "Battle of the Alamo (1836)," in *Revolts, Protests, Demonstrations, and Rebellions in American History: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Steven L. Danver, Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 303-305, here 304.

⁷⁷ Aviel Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96.

⁷⁸ *Alamo: The Price of Freedom*, directed by Kieth W. Merrill (1988; produced by Ray Herbeck Jr.), quoted in McEnteer, *Deep in the Heart*, 17.

While there is value in passing down stories of the American spirit and patriotism to inspire future generations, it is critical that our history is not distorted to serve a false narrative. A sense of pride that comes from facing challenges and overcoming adversity can help form a regional or national identity, but it can also lead to “othering.” Building an American identity that ignores the dominant group’s sense of entitlement or superiority at the cost of marginalized members of our society is dangerous. It can allow one group to maintain its power and privilege at the cost of another. It is vital that historians continue to critically examine biases to accurately educate people and not reinforce ahistorical narratives.

If Americans value “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” then we have a responsibility to extend this to all. When the romanticizing of American history, as evident in the popular portrayals of the Battle of the Alamo, disregards truth and allows the marginalization of minorities, then we fail to live up to our ideals. Historians and writers of popular literature have a duty to represent historical events without bias. While it is difficult to completely erase the presence of prejudices in analyzing history, a multifaceted approach is needed. Stereotypes and misrepresentations need to be examined, so that our society can expand its understanding of not only what historical achievements should be honored, but also what lessons call for change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Natalie Vandercook of Anaheim, California, is pursuing a B.A. in History and a minor in Anthropology with a focus on Museology at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where she is also a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). Her article printed above originated in a CSUF junior seminar in Historical Writing.