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4. NORMALIZING SUBORDINATION

*White Fantasies of Black Identity in Textbooks
Intended for Freed Slaves in the American South, 1863–1870*

School textbooks are typically produced for a mass audience of a nation's school children. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, those textbooks reveal much about the construction and reconstruction of identity, or, more accurately, how the authors of the textbooks hoped to construct and reconstruct identity.¹ Textbooks project the hopes and fantasies of those who write, illustrate, and produce them. Their degree of success in actually reproducing those hopes and fantasies in the intended consumer is, of course, an entirely different historical question. Our intent here is simply to reveal intent.

Eras of rapid social, economic, and political change often prompt curricular responses intended either to bolster traditional understandings of the world and reinforce long-standing group identities or to challenge and interrogate prior ways of seeing and to construct new narratives and identities.² Periods of civil war and the sudden emancipation of millions of slaves create particularly acute dislocations, not least of all because of the minority racial or ethnic composition of the former slaves.

Such was the case with the Civil War in the United States (1861–1865) and the wartime emancipation of more than 4 million African American slaves in the southern states in January 1863. Both northerners and southerners suddenly faced new and pressing questions: How would the southern agricultural labor force, particularly in such nationally important staple crops as cotton and tobacco, be mobilized if not through the compulsion of ownership and force? How would a racial minority, starkly different in color, caste, and culture from the racial majority, long reviled, and socially constructed as inferior, brutal, and of value only as menial labor, behave outside the direct oversight and control of whites? How would the former slaves understand themselves and their relationship to the means of production, to political life, and to the people who were accustomed to totalitarian control over life and death? Who would wield control after slavery and how? The question facing both the freed people and the rest of the nation came down to this: What sort and degree of freedom would replace the unfreedom of slavery? (Jaynes, 1986; Litwack, 1979; Mandle, 1972–1973; Ransom & Sutch, 1977; Saville, 1996; Schwalm, 1997).

The turbulent decade that followed the American Civil War, known to historians as the era of Reconstruction (1865–1876), was dominated by such questions.

J. H. Williams & W. D. Bokhorst-Heng (Eds.), (Re)Constructing Memory: Textbooks, Identity, Nation, and State, 73–91.

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Answers came from many sources: the noose at the end of the lynch mob's rope and other forms of organized terrorist action (Bryant, 1994, pp. 13–37; Clinton, 1992; Lemann, 2006; Rable, 1984); the autonomous actions of black men and women intent on creating their own households, their own institutions, their own lives, and their own freedom (Butchart, 2010, pp. 1–51; Holt, 2000; Hunter, 1997; Medford, 1992); congressional actions intended to finalize the death of slavery and to guarantee universal suffrage (Foner, 1988, pp. 228–280); the interregional mending and reassertion of white supremacy (Blum, 2005); the half-hearted federal military and civil efforts to police emancipation (Cimbala & Miller, 1999; Foner, 1988, pp. 346–425; Finley, 1996); and vacillating southern legislative responses. One response to the pressing questions posed by civil war, emancipation, and defeat, enacted in an obscure but important corner of Reconstruction, was curricular.

THE CONTRADICTION INTENTIONS OF A FREED PEOPLE'S SCHOOLING

Southern African Americans began emancipating themselves from slavery before the federal government ratified their actions. Prominent among their emancipatory actions was the symbolically and practically important act of assuring literacy for themselves and their children in defiance of American slavery's prohibitions against slave literacy. As portions of the slaveholding southern states fell to federal military control, freed slaves organized schools, sought teachers from among the few literate slaves and anyone else who would teach them, brought their clandestine schools from under the shroud of secrecy, and overwhelmed the schools that northern benevolent organizations began providing by 1862 (Butchart, 1980; Horst, 1987; Morris, 1981; Williams, 2005).

Within a year of the end of the war in April 1865, the freed people were attending schools across the South taught by more than 2,200 teachers, a quarter of them black teachers. Five years later, nearly 8,000 teachers served in southern black schools, more than one third of them black.³ Some of those teachers, particularly but not exclusively the African American teachers, expected emancipation and literacy to culminate in a radical reconstruction of the southern social and economic order; others gave little thought to the secular outcome of their work, focusing instead on denominational proselytizing and missionary work; still others, virtually all northern and southern white teachers, expected education to reimpose racial control, to promote black docility and tractability, and to encourage black reintegration into the southern labor market (Butchart, 2007, 2010, pp. 1–119). The sudden flourishing of black education encouraged an explicit curricular response: the writing and publication of curricular material exclusively for southern black schools.

TEXTBOOKS FOR A FREED PEOPLE

The story of the education of the freed people is well known by students of black education and of Reconstruction, though some of the details mentioned above have

only recently been uncovered. What is less well known is the speed with which northern writers responded to the freedmen's schools with specialized textbooks. Organizations and writers interested in the freed slaves created, in remarkably short time, primers, spellers, readers, and other didactic texts for the freedmen's schools and for black adult education classes. The earliest were published by 1863, a mere 2 years after the outbreak of war; by 1866, over a dozen primers, readers, monthly papers, and other text material for southern black schools had appeared. Titles such as *The Lincoln Primer* (1866?), *The Freedmen's Spelling Book* (1865?), *The Freedmen's Reader* series (with three graded volumes; 1866), and *The Freedmen's Primer* (1864) appeared in black schools across the South, supplemented with monthly 4-page school papers such as *Freedmen's Torchlight* (1866–?) and *The Freedman* (1864–1868). More advanced readers included *The Freedmen's Book*, by the noted author Lydia Maria Child (1865); *Plain Counsels for Freedmen*, by Union officer and Freedmen's Bureau agent Clinton B. Fisk (1866); Isaac W. Brinckerhoff's (1863) *Advice to Freedmen*; and Helen E. Brown's (1864) *John Freeman and His Family*.

All but two of those curricular resources—Child's *The Freedmen's Book* and the African Civilization Society's monthly *Freedman's Torchlight*—were published by a single source, the American Tract Society.⁴ Early in 1863, the society recognized the opportunity to publish curriculum designed specifically for its understanding of the future of African Americans. To assist in the project, the Tract Society established its own black school in Washington, DC, to determine the best types of materials for black schools and to test its first series, the *Freedmen's Library*. After a year, apparently satisfied with its experiment in constructing curriculum for black learners, it transferred control of its school to another aid agency and set about extending its line of textbooks and other material, which eventually included 14 different titles. American Tract Society textbooks and school papers achieved at least modest circulation throughout the 1860s and perhaps into the 1870s (Horst, 1987, p. 195; American Tract Society, 1865, p. 65; American Missionary Association, 1866, p. 16).⁵

The Freedmen's Book and *Freedmen's Torchlight* had different origins. The author of the former, Lydia Maria Child, was famous in her era as a prolific writer, researcher, and editor, and, in some corners, infamous as an outspoken abolitionist from the wing of American abolitionism that advocated immediate emancipation. She published *The Freedmen's Book* in 1865, intending that it be sold at cost. At 277 pages, it was the lengthiest of the curricular material written expressly for the freed people. It was not intended to be read as a single treatise. Instead, each of its 24 chapters, composed of biographical sketches of notable Africans, African Caribbeans, and African Americans, fictional stories, and advice essays, could be used as single readings in classrooms, though a concluding chapter drew together a number of the themes that emerged from the individual chapters. Though Child wrote some of the text, it included edited essays by other writers, 11 of whom were black and whose race was noted in the table of contents (Child, 1865, pp. iii–vi

and *passim*).⁶ The *Freedmen's Torchlight* was intended as a monthly, newspaper-format alternative to the American Tract Society's monthly *Freedman*. It was edited by the staff of the African Civilization Society, a northern black civil rights organization. So far as can be ascertained, only one issue was ever published, due, no doubt, to its sponsor's continual financial difficulties; there is no evidence that it ever reached black students in southern schools. Nonetheless, like other curricular material considered here, it provides glimpses into the hopes and fears of its authors in regard to emancipation and the degrees of freedom for the South's former bondsmen and, as such, is included in this analysis.

These textbooks and other curricular material comprise the entire range of texts intended specifically for the freed people in the first decade of freedom. As such, they provide a window into the intentions of the freedmen's educators, at least those who wrote curricular material. Not content with the texts used in northern common schools, broadly and inexpensively available at the time, these educators produced special texts designed for what their authors and sponsors believed to be the peculiar needs of African Americans just emerging from bondage. Arguably, their purpose was more than facilitating the extension of literacy or providing factual information; rather, by the stories they told and the ways they told them, the images they conjured, the language they employed, the futures they implied, and the futures they neglected, these texts also sought to promote particular identities among the freed people, to suggest particular aspirations, to privilege certain discourses and muffle, if not silence, others.

ANALYZING HISTORICAL CURRICULAR MATERIAL

Historians attempt to make sense of the meaning of textual material through multiple readings, taking care to understand fully the historical context in which the text was written, seeking evidence of its intended use and its audience but also the likely intentions of that audience independent of the text. Historical analysis also seeks evidence of alternative texts to fully understand the marketplace of ideas from which the text emerged and to guard against imposing expectations informed by a different age. The analysis is often facilitated by looking for evidence regarding particular themes.

In the case of the curricular material produced for the freed people, my analysis is framed by the texts' ways of dealing with, commenting on, or embodying four areas of life that the freed people would face: politics, culture, economics, and race. In each area, several questions were posed: What was portrayed, described, embodied, or implied as normal or ordinary? Given the disruption of normal or ordinary life as a consequence of civil war and emancipation, and given the actual field of possibilities opened by that disruption, what was offered as the realistic field of action and what was foreclosed? In the realms of politics, culture, economics, and race, what sorts of identities were normalized, valorized, and sanctioned, what sorts of identities were anathematized, and what sorts of identities, actually nascent (not merely

hypothesized presentistically), were silenced or negated by their absence? Such an analysis requires attention to narrative voice, diction, emplotment, verbal imagery, physical imagery (physical illustrations in the text), silences or absences, and close attention to comparison and contrast across texts.

With few exceptions, historians eschew “coding” when analyzing texts, though coding is a common practice in the social sciences. I reject coding because of its roots in positivism, suggesting a level of “scientific” certainty about the content of texts that, except in the most simplistic of discursive texts, cannot be sustained. The practice ignores the cogent critiques of positivism by poststructuralist thinkers. The subtlety of language in discursive texts, particularly texts that are encrusted with implicit ideological content, seldom yields clearly codable categories that reveal patterns of power or normativity; perhaps worse, coding cannot account for the silences, the absences, the historically possible but discursively blinkered. Rather than reporting coding frequencies and building an interpretation from them, I follow other historians in providing narrative descriptions of the themes, patterns, language, imagery, silences, and messages that a close and faithful reading finds embedded in the texts.⁷ That reading is informed by my understanding of the contexts, guided by the questions posed above, and structured around the four specific themes.

WHITE FANTASIES OF POSTSLAVERY BLACK IDENTITY

Even a cursory reading of these textbooks reveals two sharply contrasting stances, one deeply conservative, the other progressive. The conservative view was by far the more pervasive, infusing over a dozen of the texts and achieving far greater distribution than its ideological rival. The more progressive material gained little popularity among the missionary societies that sustained most of the schools, and hence was read by relatively few of the freedmen. The progressive texts are important for our purposes not for what the freed people actually read in them—few had access to them—but because they indicate that alternative perspectives and images were in the marketplace of ideas. All of the textual material produced by the American Tract Society hewed to a racially and socially conservative stance; *The Freedmen's Book* and *Freedmen's Torchlight* took a stance that contrasted sharply with the society's publications.

I argue specifically that the bulk of the textbooks designed for the freed people's schools, through narrative text, imagery, and the silencing of alternative visions, normalized the idea of racial and cultural subordination and inferiority. They normalized subordination by constructing and reproducing images, explicit lessons, and not-so-subtle suggestions of expected behavior, habits of thinking, and ways of being that, taken together, projected an identity that the authors preferred for the freedmen over alternative identities. In a setting of massive social dislocation and political ferment, in which an entire people were actively engaged in constructing new lives and a new society, these textbooks sought to influence the social and political outcome through implicit and explicit didactic means. I do not claim that

the textbooks were successful in imposing their ideology or imposing the preferred identity on the readers of their textbooks; the importance of this analysis lies in what the textbooks reveal regarding the ideas and intentions and underlying fantasies of those sponsoring the texts and the schools. How they were received is another matter entirely.

The Textbooks' Vision of Politics and Political Life

While, at some level, all of the issues embedded in the textbooks were political issues—all touched upon the eventual exercise and disposition of power—the focus here was the lessons offered in the textbooks regarding the narrower definition of politics as participation and citizenship. Overwhelmingly, the conservative texts were virtually silent on the sorts of political power and citizenship roles the newly freed slaves might gain. Of the dozen conservative textbooks available to the freed people, only one chapter of one book broached the question of citizenship. In *Advice to Freedmen*, Isaac Brinckerhoff (1863) ignored political rights, modes of governance, the processes of the franchise, and all other aspects of political and civic instruction that might be expected at the moment of emancipation. Instead, his chapter, entitled “Be Good Citizens,” stressed obligations and duties as faithful workers and subjects. Each person must contribute to the good of all, he counseled; each must “contribute his mite of influence toward the growth and prosperity of the nation, and the maintenance of the authority of the government” (p. 52 and *passim*). *Plain Counsels for Freedmen*, published after southern African Americans had gained full citizenship rights, devoted 16 chapters to urging docility, obsequence, family life, and obedience, but never mentioned rights, equality, or the nature and exercise of the franchise (Fisk, 1866).⁸ Other texts published by the American Tract Society avoided discussions of political life entirely.

Yet if the conservative schoolbooks told the free people little of value regarding the role of citizens in a republic, the operation of the electoral franchise, the meaning of democracy, or the rights and liberties of the people, and nothing at all of equality, they carried clear political messages nonetheless. Through verbal images and didactic messages, the books reiterated the importance of accepting the social and economic roles that would be dictated to the freed people by former masters and being content with lowly station. Freedom as a positive value never appeared; faithful labor predominated.

Thus, for instance, the *Third Freedmen's Reader* included a biography of the Haitian liberator, Toussaint L'Ouverture. Its portrayal of the Haitian revolution is as important for its silences as for what it said. The biography neglected to tell of the duplicity of Haitian whites, said nothing of the actions of black men and women securing their own freedom, and remained silent regarding the anger of black Haitians over Toussaint's eventual conciliation of white owners. Instead, the writer portrayed Toussaint as a charismatic black Lincoln benevolently giving freedom to a passive black mass who returned gratefully to the land as wage-earning peasants

under the charitable supervision of repatriated white planters. Order and tranquility were the obvious results of patience, deference, and wage labor. According to the biographer's conclusion,

Every part of St. Domingo was in quiet subjection to his rule; commerce and finance prospered; the island gained rapidly in wealth; the negroes worked faithfully on the plantations, and receiving the wages of their labor, were contented, obedient, and industrious. They submitted to wise regulations and necessary authority; and, being free were satisfied and happy ...

Thus, through the genius, wisdom, and efforts of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a nation of freedmen had been created out of negro slaves; and their leader had succeeded in teaching them that virtue, order, industry and necessary self-restraint, were, under God, the only and sufficient guaranty of civil and social liberty. (*Freedman's Third Reader*, 1866, p. 86)

Contrast those images and silences with the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture provided to the freed people in Child's *The Freedman's Book*. Her version told a different tale with sharply contrasting lessons. She never flinched from exposing the cruelty of Haiti's white planters, the tendency of slaveholding mulattoes to emulate white planters, the insurrection of black slaves, eventually in league with mulattoes, or the occasionally less than noble character of Toussaint himself. The biography recounted the strongly worded reply of the insurrectionists to the governor of the island when he demanded surrender; Child did not shrink from telling the freed people how Haiti's former slaves dealt with their oppressors. It dealt frankly and honestly with Toussaint's exploits and character as a leader (Child, 1865, pp. 38–44).

As opposed to the *Reader's* fictional emphasis on a happily employed, landless Haitian peasantry, *The Freedmen's Book* stressed Toussaint's insistence "that the permanence of [the black Haitian's] freedom depended in a great measure upon their becoming owners and cultivators of the land." Lydia Maria Child was scrupulous with her material, however. She related Toussaint's own contradiction when he invited the old planters to return and operate the plantations, along with the uprising in a portion of the island during which he earned black enmity that "to this day ... is remembered against him in the island." Throughout the biography, blacks appeared as independent actors, critically evaluating their own position and interests, and evaluating Toussaint as a leader and opposing him when his actions were contrary to their interests (Child, 1865, pp. 52, 55, 57–60).

Perhaps most remarkable is *The Freedmen's Book's* portrayal of the actors in that historical drama. The white actors, from the planters through Napoleon and his generals, were haughty, duplicitous, and violent. The black actors could rise to equal violence when necessary for their own freedom, but throughout the biography they were portrayed as intelligent, capable, and independent. The biography avoided the sentimentality of the *Reader's* version of the story, telling it instead as the stark historical drama of white supremacy on a collision course with black liberation.

Lydia Maria Child offered a race history that could be a source of pride and could provide insight into the historical roots of oppression; the *Reader* offered a sanitized history in which blacks were happy in their subjection to white control and in which oppression never figured.⁹

Freedmen's Torchlight, intended as a monthly school supplement for the freedmen's schools, published by the African Civilization Society, joined Child in offering images of a strong, courageous, independent black society. Its description of the freedmen in 1866 stood in sharp relief against the descriptions that filled the more conservative textbooks. Asking, "And Who Are the Freedmen," the paper replied by recalling the degradation of slavery and the answers to slaves' prayers:

When the Union soldiers marched through cities and plantations, they laid down the axe and the hoe, and they marched too ... They could fight and did fight as Milliken's Bend, Olustee and many other places can testify. These are the men, the Freedmen, who fought, bled and fell, by which this country today has peace; which could not have been had it not been for those who are now called the Freedmen. (*Freedmen's Torchlight*, 1, December 1866, p. 1)

The Textbooks' Vision of Culture and Black Life

As an adjunct to their images of a depoliticized black society, the conservative textbooks drew sharply polarized images of the cultural allegiances available to the freed people. The textbooks privileged a deracialized, synthetic culture drawn from northern white, middle-class norms and contrasted it with vicious caricatures of southern black culture. Class-based notions of proper home life, with roots in the ideology of domesticity, filled the pages of the textbooks. They included clear messages that failure to achieve the domestic ideal reflected negatively on the race and on individuals. Piety and temperance were constant adjuncts to lessons on acceptable cultural allegiances.

Domestic iconography abounded in the imagery and lessons on culture. Readers could not miss the constant evocation of idealized family life or avoid the explicit, negative comparison with stereotypes of southern black life. "Smith's Cottage," one of the many stories in the *Freedman*, portraying an ideal home with an ideal family, described the home as "all embowered in vines and roses," where one could see the

good wife inside getting supper. The baby was creeping on the clean floor; another little one, about three years old was playing with the kitten in the corner; and outside, near the doorstep, were two older children—a boy and a girl,—who looked as if they had just come from school. The little girl had gathered some roses from the climbing bush beside the porch, which was loaded with blossoms; and was decking the shaggy neck of a good-natured-looking dog.

If the word picture was not enough, there was a large engraving of the two latter children and the dog. The children were well dressed in hat and stylish clothing and were obviously white, with small mouths and noses and straight hair. It was indeed “a picture of home-comfort,” but not one with which the freed children could easily identify (*Freedman*, 4, June 1867, p. 21).

John Freeman and His Family, by Helen E. Brown, similarly dwelt on domestic imagery, stressing the power of household cleanliness to discipline and control the family, and, by extension, the race. Brown illustrated that power through her story of a fictional young black man who had been jailed for stealing. Her novella’s white heroine, the teacher Miss Horton, taught his widowed mother to keep a clean house,

and when Sam was released from his confinement he found a far more cheerful home than he had left. He wondered much at the change, and made up his mind, since his mother was taking pains to be smart, he would try to do better, and to profit by the many good instructions he had received from Lieutenant Hall while in the guard-house. (Brown, 1864, p. 87)

Brown used her Miss Horton to build an image of respectability and proper culture, both through Horton’s exhortations and through the negative portrayal of black life that Brown wove into the narrative. At one point in the story, Miss Horton asked a mother, Clarissa, to be certain that her children were “clean and neat every day when they come to school.” Clarissa responded,

“Yes, ma’am, that I’ll do, and thank you for your goodness. I was brought up to be clean and neat myself. Mistress Lenox had nobody in her kitchen that wasn’t ’spectable.”

“It is a great thing to be cleanly in our habits,” said Miss Horton, as she glanced around the room which seemed to contradict Clarissa’s assertion. It was not a little surprising to hear that a woman who was so tidy in her dress, as Clarissa certainly was, could live in a room so completely littered and filthy; and she made up her mind to give her new acquaintance a few useful hints. So she went on talking in a pleasant and easy manner on the subject. “We must carry our neatness into everything. Our homes are far pleasanter and more comfortable when they are in good order, with the floor swept and scrubbed, the chairs and tables set back, and the dishes washed and put away,” and she looked around the room, as she spoke, at the many things scattered about. “My mother used to teach me a very good lesson, when I was a little girl, which I have never forgotten, ‘A place for everything and everything in its place,’ she used to say ... It was well that she was so strict, because it helped us to form a habit of neatness when we were young, which will last forever.”

Clarissa said nothing, but after Miss Horton was gone, she remarked to her girls,—“We’ll just put a pin in there, now, children. It’s white folks ways to

keep things put back, and we'll begin and do so. I wants we should be just as near like white folks as ever we can fetch it." (Brown, 1864, pp. 28–30)

Brown then remarked to her audience of freed people: "Crowded together as they were, with little or no furniture, and with the old, lazy, filthy habits of the slave-quarters clinging to them, it could not be expected that they should approach very near to the true idea of home" (Brown, 1864, pp. 31–32).

The same cultural themes appeared in lessons that were aimed at promoting temperance. The temperate man was the domestic ideal, with a happy family and a happy home; the intemperate man had a miserable home and a mean family life. In one temperance lesson, for instance, children learned of Dick Morse: "Last year he signed the pledge; and look at him now! Look at his nice house, and his good wife, and his smart clothes. He has just as much work as he can do, and just as much food as he can eat, and as much cheer as is good for a man." His antithesis in the lesson was Hal Gear, "a slave to strong drink, bound fast in chains ... He can't work, for half the time he is in drink. His wife has lost all hope, and his home is like a pig's pen; and if he does not look poor, and mean as a slave, I will give up" (*Freedman*, 4, April 1867, p. 15).

The more progressive texts, by contrast, made no invidious comparisons between black and white culture. Where the *Freedman* invariably cast the freedmen's teachers as white, *Freedman's Torchlight* argued explicitly that African Americans were best able to educate the freedmen. Where much of the American Tract Society material held up northern middle-class white cultural standards for black emulation and drew negative caricatures of black life and living standards, *The Freedmen's Book* and *Freedmen's Torchlight* portrayed the freedmen as intelligent, independent, and capable of defining their own cultural standards (*Freedmen's Torchlight*, 1, December 1866, pp. 1–4). The only foray into domesticity in the more progressive sources was Child's brief essay on "The Laws of Health," where she explained briefly the hygienic reasons for personal cleanliness. Nothing in that chapter implied the godliness or morality of cleanliness, nor implied a personal or racial failure in a lack of cleanliness; the issue was simply one of health (Child, 1865, pp. 246–250).

The Textbooks and Economics

The ultimate shape of post-emancipation black life and culture would, of course, be conditioned by the place of African Americans in the southern economic fabric. At the intersection of culture and economics were textbook lessons on black economic activity and participation. Images of ideal black family life, for example, almost invariably pivoted on the display of consumer goods, never on the production of the family's or the community's goods. The well-regulated home, as depicted in the *Freedman*, was filled with manufactured goods—lamps, dishes, tablecloths, vases, books, and other consumables. One writer pictured a black community bent

on self-improvement. Success in that endeavor was indicated by proper household consumption:

Closets were built, and stored with crockery, there were hand-irons and pot-hooks in the chimney, books upon the shelf, and mirrors and pictures adorned the walls. The bed was no longer a heap of dirty straw or rags, but had its comfortable mattress and neat quilt. Doormats became fashionable, and brooms and mops were at hand to keep all things clean ... Even clocks and watches had found their way here and there into an apartment or pocket. (*Freedman*, 4, July 1867, p. 26)

The school monthly periodical, the *Freedman*, included engravings in every issue. They depicted children in stylish clothing and contrasted the hovel of lazy blacks with the well-appointed chambers of successful people. The masthead depicted a black family with the father seated at a cloth-covered table with a modern oil lamp, reading from the Bible. He wore a frock coat, while his well-dressed wife sat across from him mending garments (*Freedman*, 1864–1868).

More important aspects of economic life also appeared in the textbooks. Lydia Maria Child emphasized the necessity for black landownership in her writings and provided biographies of black intellectuals and craftsmen (Child, 1865, pp. 52 and *passim*). The more conservative text material, however, consistently portrayed African Americans in dependent, wage-labor relationships. One fictional work for schools was careful to insinuate the proper racial division of labor, where whites did “the thinking and planning,” while the blacks did the “washing and ironing,” raised the crops, and took care of other manual labor (Brown, 1864, pp. 41–42). Other authors lectured the freedmen at length about the work ethic, thrift, temperance, and fidelity to contracts. Brinckerhoff’s *A Warning to Freedmen Against Intoxicating Drinks* betrayed as great a worry about intemperance’s impact on production as on its deleterious effects on individuals and families. His *Advice to Freedmen* included chapters entitled “Be Industrious,” “Be Economical,” “Be Temperate,” “Punctuality,” and “Provide for Your Family,” in which he lectured at length about punctual, faithful labor; he had nothing to say about independent production nor about the potential rapaciousness of employers (Brinckerhoff, 1863, 1865a; see also Brinckerhoff, 1865b). A reading lesson in another text involved a conversation between a white planter and a white northern teacher in which the planter remarked, “Though I pay [my workers] by the month, I am always careful to take out so much for every day’s work they lose through their own misconduct. I find this has a good effect on them” (*Freedman*, 4, May 1867, p. 20).

Helen Brown’s hero, John Freeman, lectured his family on “what it means to be free.” His explanation pivoted entirely on work:

It is not to be let loose like the wild hogs in the woods, to root along in the bogs and just pick up a living as we can. No; we are men now, and we’re free men, too; and we’ve got to do just what free men do. You look around and you see

every freeman, black and white, works for a living; works, I say, not grubs and roots. He works in some 'spectable professions. (Brown, 1864, pp. 10–11; see also pp. 34–35)

Brown was seldom satisfied with a positive lecture, however; she also drew on her fearful fantasies of black culture for a negative example. John Freeman's son-in-law exemplified the indolence in the freed people that her textbook sought to counter. "He was a lazy and careless fellow" who had been a coachman while a slave, Brown explained. He longed for the prestige and livery of that station, and felt "disgraced and insulted" to be expected to do common labor when free (Brown, 1864, pp. 36–38).

The assumption of class and occupational immobility was clear in Brown's work, as in nearly all the other conservative textbooks. Students read only of blacks in subservient positions. They read, for example, that as a slave, Aunt Jane had been a maid; now she was free. "Aunt Jane is a slave no more; but is now, in truth, a maid in a large, fine house." The only difference that the writer could point to was that now Aunt Jane bought her own clothes rather than wearing those given her by an owner; beyond that, little in her objective condition appeared to have changed (*Freedman*, 4, July 1867, p. 27).

In contrast, Child's lessons in economics never privileged middle-class consumption as a cultural or economic ideal and did not normalize subservient occupations for the freed people. Her approach indicated, by comparison, the intent of the conservative texts by providing her readers with a critical consideration of the dominant economic system of the era and by offering images of people of African descent in influential occupations. Her approach to economics began with the words of Ignatius Sancho, a freed African who lived in Britain. He condemned western colonialism's effects on the natives of colonized lands. These "first visitors from Christian countries," these "Christian customers," first taught the "acts of deception and wanton cruelty" of which the colonizers then complained, and reinforced them through "strong liquors, powder and bad fire-arms to inflame them to madness." All of that had been fostered by the "cursed avidity for wealth." In contrast to the conservative textbooks' almost universal portrayal of white former masters and employers as benevolently coaxing African Americans toward civilized living, Child quoted from one of Sancho's correspondents to give students provocative lessons about the economic system and its social consequences: "It is no uncommon thing, my good Sancho, for one half of the world to *use* the other half like brutes, and then endeavor to *make* them so." Her biographies featured black women and men who were writers, scientists, mathematicians, businessmen, orators, and thinkers; the conservative texts offered no black economic future beyond wage-earning agricultural labor, while simultaneously extolling a domestic ideal centered on middle-class patterns of consumption far beyond the economic means of plantation workers (Child, 1865, pp. 8–9, 11, and *passim*).

The Textbooks and Race

It is already clear how race was constructed in the texts. Whether dealing with politics, culture, or economic issues, the conservative texts presented southern black students with an almost unrelievedly negative image of the black race and persistently contrasted the race's putative backwardness, lack of initiative, and subservience with whites' cultured presence, energy, and leadership. Blacks were referred to as Aunt Deborah or Uncle Toby, or "Beckie, Sam's Wife"; only whites were accorded the honor of a title: Mr. Smith, Miss Allen. White children were babies or children; black children were "pickaninnies." Blacks were only to be workers, to be plantation hands, to continue to live in the old slave quarters in many cases. They were depicted as naturally and inevitably dependent upon the benevolent, paternalistic assistance of white southerners. They were depicted as highly impressionable and imitative; they had only to be told that a thing was done by white folk and they could be expected to follow suit. In one story, whites were remarking with approval that the black race had made acceptable progress since emancipation. "And you ought to have seen them all pair off after church last Sunday," remarked one fictional white character, "and come trudging home arm in arm. I told George and Josie, when they were married, that they must do so, for it was the fashion for husbands and wives; and now they almost all do it. Whatever you tell one goes through the quarters like wildfire" (*Freedman, 4*, April 1867, p. 16).

The freed people were portrayed as docile, tractable, and fitted for paternalistic oversight. The white planter in one serialized story remarked that his work was no longer simply doing the business of the estate. He was now also "a teacher, who must patiently instruct, train, and discipline the hands; and a father, who must look after the interests of an immense family." The white protagonists in that story went on to plan a store and a bath house for the black subjects. The blacks were always pleased to do extra work for the northern white teacher in the story, for, like domesticated pets, "they seem always eager to do something to show their respect and affection" (*Freedman, 4*, May 1867, p. 20; *Freedman, 4*, June 1867, p. 24), but only white characters had the initiative and foresight to plan and implement.

The authors of the American Tract Society's textbooks repeatedly drilled home assumptions about black ignorance and mental inferiority. When the teacher in one of the *Freedmen's* reading lessons gave the freed people on the plantation a lesson in personal hygiene, the black women in the story were all made to exclaim, "Did you ever?" "Who ever heard of such things afore?" "Bless you, honey," cried Aunt Sally, "for 'structing us poor darkies this way! We don't know nothin'." As was typical in most of the conservative textbooks, the white former slaveholder was portrayed positively in this particular lesson (*Freedman, 4*, July 1867, p. 28). Yet all of the textbooks were written by northern authors.

In Brown's didactic novella, the freedmen sought to live and do "as the whites." They were pictured as childlike and easily led, but erring and given to wrong

impressions of the meaning of freedom. All the whites in Brown's book were constructed as pious, noble, selfless, and understanding, even if patronizing. The countenance of one "beamed with a genial, benevolent expression, calculated to inspire confidence and respect"; another had a "winning voice," "was always kind and gentle ... respectful and polite"; a third white character worked "with an untiring zeal ... busy, preserving order, instructing, counseling, and cheering the freedmen" (Brown, 1864, pp. 16, 25, 32–33, 70).

As contrasted with this energetic group, Brown's freedmen, excepting only her hero, John Freeman, were often "lounging under a tree," calling one another "lazy, mean niggers," living in quarters "completely littered and filthy," or controlled by "the old, lazy, filthy habits of the slave quarters." The novella's teachers assured each other that "we must have great patience with them" and "treat them as we do children." Some freedmen, like John Freeman's son-in-law, found liberty too trying and longed to escape to the security and ease of slavery (Brown, 1864, pp. 28, 31, 32, 36–42, 64–77).

The contrast between the conservative and progressive texts was more striking in the ways they constructed race than in any other area. The conservative texts constructed blacks as unrelentingly ignorant, retrograde, lazy, physically ugly, and immoral, a picture made more stark by the contrasting portrait of whites as cultured, benevolent, intelligent, constantly busy and efficient, handsome, and moral. In contrast to the conservative texts, the *Freedmen's Torchlight* spoke of the freedmen's desire for freedom, their courage in battle, and their independent actions to assure their own freedom. Its editors spoke affirmatively of northern white teachers, but told their southern black audience that it was black teachers, not white, who were best equipped to teach the freed people (*Freedmen's Torchlight*, 1, December 1866, pp. 1, 3).

Likewise, *The Freedmen's Book* never portrayed African Americans negatively, although, as seen in the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture, when appropriate Child did not hesitate to portray whites as venal and treacherous nor to portray L'Ouverture himself as fallible. Child's biographies of Benjamin Banneker, Phillis Wheatley, James Forten, Frederick Douglass, Ignatius Sancho, William Boen, and others portrayed an articulate, courageous, inventive, independent, entrepreneurial, literate people, capable of leadership and independent action and worthy of emulation. Child did not construct the freedmen as docile, tractable children, but as active, independent women and men. Her stories affirmed the intellectual and moral equality of the races. Nowhere in her book would black students find African Americans living contentedly under the tutelage of whites, or any intimation of racial hierarchy as the inevitable and proper nature of society. Conservative writers invented kindly white teachers and genial white planters to gain black acceptance of white hegemony; Child wrote biographies and invented stories that challenged white hegemony and offered compelling visions of positive black action on the world (Child, 1865).

The closing paragraph of “Our Home,” a serialized story in the *Freedman*, encapsulated well many of the themes that dominated the conservative texts—political quiescence, patriarchal domination by benevolent whites, access to consumer goods, a synthetic, deracialized culture, and silence toward issues of class and wage-labor relationships. In the imagination of this writer, the community in “Our Home” had a benevolent employer, apparently the man who had previously held the freed people in slavery; the story’s black characters consistently referred to him as “master.” The community also had a white teacher, a store, and wages. It

was the picture of a free people, rising, by industry and virtue and knowledge, from the condition of brutes, to that of men. They saw the advantages of industry, and they were industrious. They found out the benefits of law and order; and conformed cheerfully to all necessary rules. They began to understand that work was in itself a blessing, and all chose to work. They noticed the difference between the sober and the drinking man, and strong drink found no favor among them. They made the discovery, that the alphabet was the key to knowledge; and every one, young and old, was eager to learn to read ... Kindness and good will everywhere prevailed ... No wonder that peace and happiness and prosperity smiled upon them. (*Freedman*, 4, August 1867, p. 32)

That picture tells us far more about the fears and fantasies of its author than about conditions in the South, of course. It speaks to the unhappiness of conservative evangelicals with emerging conditions in the North and fears of African Americans now free of the racial discipline of slavery. The texts relied on hopefully compelling word-pictures of a harmonious, orderly society in which African Americans accepted subservient places within a divinely ordained hierarchical society. The texts constructed an identity for African Americans to replace a slave identity, but the new identity was predicated on a life only slightly removed from the social relations of slavery.

CONCLUSIONS

If we had no evidence of alternative pedagogical material, criticism of the most heavily used curricular material might be muted by charges of presentism. Yet, as we have seen, there were alternatives. Further, there were contemporary critics of the sort of material pumped into the freedmen’s schools by the tract society. For at least a decade before the war, black abolitionists had called for inculcating a positive self-image for black students, and the American Freedmen’s Union Commission, the primary rival of the more conservative aid societies, explicitly opposed the idea of special textbooks for freedmen’s schools (Lang, 1974, pp. 149–151; *American Freedman*, 1, May 1866, p. 32). Progressive texts were written and available, but it was the conservative material that was most fully promoted.

That conservative material sought, through verbal and engraved images, to normalize subordination. Its writers constructed an imaginary world in which African Americans had no political roles and sought none, and in which the freedmen were consumers, not producers, and in which their labor was portrayed consistently as subordinate workers in wage-labor relationships as opposed to land owners, independent producers, or a cooperative working community. They constructed a world that scorned southern black culture and privileged the passive consumption and display of white middle-class culture. Finally, these texts normalized, sanctified, and reinforced racial subordination through demeaning portrayals of the race itself.

NOTES

- ¹ In the case of the United States, historians have created a rich history of the nation's public school curriculum, though the primary carrier of the curriculum, the school textbook, has not received as much attention as the ideas about and the changes in the curriculum itself. Among good sources, see for example Anyon (1979), Elson (1964), FitzGerald (1979), Giordano (2003), Selden (1989), Tyack (1999), and Zimmerman (2002).
- ² Among others, see Andreasen (1985), Campos Pérez (2010), and Whitescarver (2002). Among the few writers to have spoken explicitly about textbooks and identity construction, see Nash (2009).
- ³ That rate of growth of southern black education continued through the 1870s. By the end of Reconstruction, there were more than 10,000 teachers in southern black schools, fully two thirds of them black teachers (Butchart, 2010, p. 187). Subsequent actions by southern legislators and increasing oppression and black poverty slowed the growth of black education after Reconstruction, however.
- ⁴ See *Publications of the American Tract Society* (catalogue, Boston, March 1867), p. 4, for a full list of American Tract Society publications intended for the freedmen's schools. The American Tract Society was the primary publisher of the texts reported in this chapter as conservative.
- ⁵ For evidence of the circulation of the tract society's material, see, for example, B. G. Bryan to George Whipple, December 1, 1865, and S. J. Whiton to Secretaries of the American Missionary Association, December 1, 1865, both in American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University; William C. Child to R. M. Manly, June 1866, Letters Received, Papers of the Virginia Superintendent of Education, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, National Archives (hereafter, records within the bureau are indicated as BRFAL); John Alvord to William C. Child, March 21, 1867, Letters Sent, Papers of the Education Division, BRFAL; *American Missionary*, 11 (October 1867), p. 218; William M. Colby to Thomas C. Williams, April 16, 1868, Letters Sent, Arkansas Superintendent of Education, BRFAL; Mary Atwater to R. L. Harper, October 26, 1868, Letters Received, Alabama Superintendent of Education, BRFAL; I. P. Warren to John Alvord, August 26, 1869, Letters Received, Education Division, BRFAL.
- ⁶ For a brief introduction to Child, see Butchart (1994, pp. 111–118). For a fuller treatment, see Meltzer (1965).
- ⁷ See particularly Grosvenor, Lawn, and Rousmaniere (1999), Nóvoa (2001, pp. 45–66), as well as other essays in this volume. Cohen (1999) is also helpful, but see the cautions in Palmer (1990).
- ⁸ For a particularly insightful reading of Fisk's textbook, see Farmer-Kaiser (2010), especially Chapter 1.
- ⁹ See also her fictional chapter in which she portrayed a group of slaves planning a revolt, a topic certainly never essayed by the more conservative writers. One slave remarked that education is the key to the white man's power. However, Child made little of that speech. The focus of the story was the black desire for freedom (Child, 1865, pp. 103–110).

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