Who Needs Multicultural Education? White Students, U.S. History, and the Construction of a Usable Past

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This article evaluates the efforts of three teachers at a predominantly white middle school to create a multicultural U.S. history curriculum by focusing on the experiences of enslaved African Americans during the Civil War. I argue that this focus unintentionally undermines students' ability to use history as a resource for thinking about contemporary race relations. I conclude with some suggestions for creating a multicultural history curriculum that will benefit both white students and students of color.

The multicultural education debate has intensified in recent years, particularly around efforts to reform the history and social science curriculum to make it more multicultural. Critics (Bloom 1989; D'Souza 1991; Ravitch 1990; Schlesinger 1992) have attacked multicultural educators as radicals out of touch with mainstream American society, have argued that the emphasis on race and ethnicity in the curriculum is divisive, and have attacked multicultural curricula as intellectually weak and victim to political correctness.

An equally heated debate rages in California. In 1987 the California State Board of Education adopted a new *History-Social Science Framework* (1988). While this framework increased the history requirements, emphasized studying major historical periods and events in depth, and emphasized the use of literature and primary source documents, its call for a multicultural perspective in the teaching of U.S. and world history caused controversy. According to California's *History-Social Science Framework*, a multicultural perspective necessitates a history that "reflect[s] the experiences of men and women of different racial, religious, and ethnic groups," and also presents U.S. history as a "complex story of many peoples and one nation," an "unfinished struggle to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution" (1988:5).

After all textbooks that publishers submitted were rejected because they did not attend sufficiently to diversity, a series of textbooks for kindergarten through eighth grade published by Houghton Mifflin and an additional eighth grade U.S. history textbook published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston were eventually approved for adoption.

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Community organizations throughout California, representing many racial, ethnic, and religious groups, did not think that these textbooks were progressive and multicultural. African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Jews, and Muslims argued that the new Houghton Mifflin textbooks were biased, that events and people were omitted or misrepresented, that the achievements of whites were privileged over nonwhites, and that racial, ethnic, and religious groups were stereotyped (Banks and Trombley 1990; Drummond 1992; King 1992; Trombley 1990a, 1990b, 1991). Diverse community groups feared that these textbooks would perpetuate stereotypes and promote prejudice among the students who used them. Despite the intensity of this debate, most school districts introduced these textbooks in the fall of 1991. Now they are used in virtually all districts in California.

I will not review the California or the national debate; instead I will address two issues in relation to this debate. First is the issue of audience. Underlying much of this debate is the assumption that students of color are the primary audience for multicultural education. Although there are many different definitions and models of multicultural education (Gibson 1976; Sleeter and Grant 1987; Suzuki 1984), most writers have focused on the benefits that a multicultural curriculum holds for students of color. For example, a multicultural curriculum can enhance the academic success of minority students (Ogbu 1992), or it can provide these students with materials that foster the development of strong minority-cultural identities (McCarthy 1990). Including historical figures of color in U.S. history, as well as their perspectives on historical events, will allow students of color to see themselves in history, to hear the stories of their people, and to recognize the contributions of their ancestors to U.S. history.

While it is important to provide students of color with a history of the United States which recognizes the presence and contributions of their ancestors, it is equally important to recognize that a more inclusive, multicultural history of the United States also holds potential benefits for white students, something that has been noted (Banks 1989) but largely ignored in this debate.

Second is the issue of what counts as a multicultural history in actual classrooms. Empirical data on which to argue the pros and cons of multicultural reform in history and social science have been missing from the debate. Anecdotal evidence has been cited, and the scholarly arguments are rarely grounded in the happenings in actual classrooms. While a multicultural history curriculum in classrooms is likely to be very different from one place to another throughout the United States, there is virtually no literature on this topic (Mehan et al. 1995). Therefore it is difficult to measure the worth of arguments concerning multicultural reform of the history and social science curriculum.

I address these two issues by presenting some findings from a case study of three teachers' efforts to present a multicultural history of the

United States in a predominantly white, suburban middle school. Specifically, I want to discuss one teacher's efforts to provide her students with a more inclusive, multicultural history of the United States by focusing on the experiences of African Americans through an in-depth study of southern slavery during the Civil War period. After discussing the methodology and setting of my case study, I present excerpts from a classroom discussion of the uprisings/riots in Los Angeles following the verdict in the first trial of the officers accused of beating Rodney King. I then use this discussion as a vantage point from which to present and analyze the curriculum in use in this classroom, arguing that the exclusive focus on the experiences of slaves in the Civil War South as a means of including African Americans in U.S. history and the emphasis on the immorality of slavery unintentionally undermine students' ability to effectively use history as a context for thinking and talking about contemporary race relations. Following this, I discuss the lessons we can learn from this classroom for multicultural reform of the history and social science curriculum, and then I conclude with some remarks on the value of a multicultural history for white students.

An Ethnographically Informed Discourse Analysis of the Curriculum

The "impact" that textbooks and other curriculum have on the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of students is complex. The reading or use of cultural texts (broadly defined) is not a simple process involving the transmission and consumption of meaning that is located "in" the text (Liebes and Katz 1990; Long 1986; Press 1991; Radway 1984; Shively 1992). It is rather a social and cultural process involving the fabrication (Griswold 1987) or construction of textual meaning, meaning that is not located in the text but in the interaction between cultural texts and their readers.

Luke, de Castell, and Luke, in a discussion of the authority of the school textbook, questioned this transmission-consumption view of the relationship between textbooks and student knowledge, and argued for

> a more interactive and pragmatic explanation of text apprehension, whereby meaning is contingent on the interaction between the reader's prior knowledge, the institutional setting within which the reading task is situated, the teacher who teaches the text, and the distinctive features of the textbook *per se*. [1983:125, italics in original; see also Apple 1993; Apple and Christian-Smith 1991; McNeil 1981]

Recent studies have found that the implemented curriculum, what teachers actually teach in the classroom, is not a simple reflection of the official curriculum (Cohen et al. 1990; Stevenson and Baker 1991) and that textbooks do not dictate the content of classroom instruction (Freeman and Porter 1989). Mediating factors influence the construction of classroom knowledge, from the teacher's perceived need to maintain

order and control in the classroom (McNeil 1981, 1986) to the cultural biases and assumptions teachers and students bring with them into the classroom, biases that can affect their realization of curriculum content (Wills 1994).

In addition, the construction of knowledge in the classroom is not confined to the use of textbooks in the fabrication of historical meaning. Teachers draw upon a variety of resources, from documentary and popular films to laser-disc presentations, literature, primary source documents, role playing and cooperative learning activities, and a variety of reference materials from school and public libraries. Therefore an investigation of the impact of textbooks and other curriculum on student knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs necessitates an "ethnography of the curriculum," in which teachers' and students' use of educational and popular materials in constructing knowledge in actual classrooms is examined. In this way we can better understand the processes whereby the metaphors, modes of representation, and arguments present in the curriculum make their way into teachers' and students' discourse.

To investigate the role of curriculum in constructing students' knowledge of racial and ethnic groups in U.S. history, I spent ten months at a school that I am calling "Canyon Middle School," from September 1991 through June 1992, observing and videotaping lessons in three eighth-grade U.S. history classrooms. Canyon Middle School is a predominantly white (78%), suburban school located in San Diego County, California. The three teachers I observed—"Judy," "Ruth," and "Tom"—are white, as am I. I videotaped a total of 130 lessons in these three classrooms and transcribed the audio portion of these videotapes for analysis of classroom talk. Videotaped lessons include teacher lectures and discussions, which often draw upon the textbook and other materials, as well as documentary and popular films, laser-disc presentations and filmstrips, student presentations, skits, and cooperative learning activities.

I analyzed student work including essays, "Fact or Fiction" books on Native Americans, journal writing, Civil War newspapers, a variety of Revolutionary War projects, reports on Native American leaders, and Constitution board games created by the students. My observations were also supplemented by conversations with the teachers about specific lessons and their teaching in general, as well as formal interviews with the teachers and a small group of students in Judy's class. Finally, borrowing an idea from Wertsch and O'Connor (1994), I asked students in Judy's, Ruth's, and Tom's U.S. history classes to write brief narrative descriptions of U.S. history. Thus, through extensive observation, interviews, microanalysis of classroom discourse, and content analysis of curricular materials and student work, I was able to record not only how students came to understand the place of racial and ethnic groups in U.S. history but also the role of the curriculum, mediated by the tacit cultural

knowledge of students and teachers, in the construction of their historical knowledge.

The three teachers were chosen for their very different teaching styles and interests, and their different views concerning a multicultural history of the United States. Judy, who had been teaching for six years, was interested in giving her students an understanding of the perspectives of different groups in U.S. history through cooperative learning activities and small group projects. This included making them aware of the injustices some groups have experienced in the United States. While all three teachers were using the new Houghton Mifflin textbook *A More Perfect Union* (Armento et al. 1991) for the first time, Judy was also piloting curriculum from the Teachers' Curriculum Institute in Palo Alto, California (TCI 1992), a packet of materials containing slide lectures and a variety of cooperative learning activities, including activities intended to help students see historical events from multiple perspectives.

Ruth, who had taught at Canyon Middle School since it opened 21 years ago, wanted to make her students aware of the contributions of diverse cultures and give them an appreciation of cultural diversity. Ruth favored individual and group projects, as well as role-playing activities that reenacted historical events. While her students sometimes read from the textbook during class, she viewed the textbook—like Judy—as one resource among many that the students could draw upon when working on their projects.

Tom, who had also taught at Canyon Middle School since it opened, wanted his students to learn both the good and the bad in U.S. history, and he regularly noted the "unfairness" that different groups had experienced in the United States. Unlike Judy and Ruth, Tom's teaching was centered around the textbook. He had his students read each textbook chapter for homework, answer the review questions, and then discuss the material the next day in class. Movies, student reports, and articles on historical periods or events supplemented the textbook.

The Historical Context of Contemporary Race Relations

In this section I present an excerpt from a discussion in Judy's class in which she encouraged her students to use their knowledge of the experiences of African Americans in U.S. history to think about contemporary race relations. I focus specifically on Judy's class for two reasons: this was one of the most controversial discussions concerning race relations in the three classrooms that I observed, and Judy is explicitly encouraging her students to use history as a resource in understanding contemporary events.

In May 1991, Judy's students were studying the Civil War period. Following the guidelines of the California *History-Social Science Framework*, which argues for studying major historical events and periods in depth, Judy spent eight weeks studying the Civil War period, with a

specific emphasis on learning about the experiences of enslaved African Americans in the South. Judy's intention was not only to teach her students about the growing conflict between the North and the South but also to make them aware of the cruelties, indignities, and injustices African Americans had experienced under slavery.

Judy used the documentary film *Roots of Resistance: The Underground Railroad*, which depicts the resistance of slaves to slavery, the Underground Railroad, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Dred Scott decision, as a starting point for discussing southern slavery. Her students had also read the first few chapters in *A More Perfect Union*, dealing with slavery and the growing conflict between North and South, and they were also reading *To Be a Slave* (Lester 1968), a collection of interviews of African Americans who experienced slavery firsthand.

Current events transformed a strictly historical discussion of southern slavery into an opportunity to connect history to current events. The verdict had been announced in the first trial of the Los Angeles officers accused of beating Rodney King, followed by the uprising/riots in Los Angeles. Judy asked her students to draw upon their knowledge of African Americans in U.S. history to talk about the common experiences of African Americans in U.S. society.

Judy began this discussion by emphasizing that the inequities that African Americans faced in U.S. society had not changed from the Civil War to the present. Judy stressed to her students that the uprising/riots in Los Angeles affect all of us:

> (1) Teacher: I strongly encourage all of you to pay attention to this kinda stuff because, um, this problem is not that far away from us. We have ghettos and barrios right here in San Diego, where people live who are just as angry as those people in L.A., who are just as angry as those slaves who feel totally disenfranchised and feel like there is no government protection for them. They have freedom, but do they have equality? The same issue. You know, we can look at the issue today of equality: who has equality? Who has equal opportunity under the law, or under our society, as the slaves looked at once they were freed in 1860, in 1863? Same type of thing, and people in L.A. are saying the exactly same—this exact same thing. That there is no equality. We have no opportunity. We have no jobs. The number one problem that people who live in, in those neighborhoods talk about is police brutality. That they don't have the same rights under the law.

Freedom, equality, economic opportunity, brutality, equal protection, and rights under the law—these are the issues that link the common experiences and concerns of African Americans in the United States. For Judy, and also for Ruth and Tom (and, frankly, for any history teacher I have ever talked to), the point of history is that it speaks to the present. It helps us to understand the role of the past in shaping current events. Judy wanted to help her students see that the struggle for freedom, equality, equal protection, and rights under the law are common experiences that unite African Americans today with African Americans in

the past. But as the discussion continues, it becomes apparent that these links between the past and the present are not at all obvious to the students:

(1) Teacher: So, you know, my question to you is: have things changed that much? Or do we still have these same kinds of issues in our society? Do we think that our society is, is—um, has equality for everybody? Or not? Carl?
(2) Carl: I don't know. I think, I think [inaudible] bring it upon themselves because—
(3) Teacher: Okay. How would they do that?
(4) Carl: 'Cause I don't—I mean. I mean, I'm not racist against black people or anything, but if you look at, like, all the minorities that we've had in our country, for the last 20 or 30 years—the Japanese and the, the, um, Philippines, and everything. They've all come to our country and they've started businesses and, it'll have, places like the black people do down in the 'hood and everything. They have their own businesses, and the Koreans have—have businesses, but I think black people—
(5) Teacher: Let me play devil's advocate with you for a minute here, and say to you, um, those people were not brought here as slaves.
(6) Carl: Well yeah, but, I mean, there are no slaves anymore, I mean. I mean—I mean, there's plenty of people who are, are racist against [them], against other, other minorities, not just blacks.
(7) Teacher: Uh huh.
(8) Carl: And—but they've put up with it, and they've gone and—against odds, they've started businesses, but black people, I mean—I mean, I'm not saying all of them 'cause there are a lot of successful black people, but a lot of 'em just kind of think that everybody's against 'em, and they just stood down there and they don't have jobs and stuff, and they think that everybody's against 'em.
(9) Teacher: Okay. Patty?
(10) Patty: Well in response to what Carl said, I don't know if he thinks about this, but it's possible that a lot of blacks feel like they're—that everyone's against them because—through, I mean, through their descendants they've been told about, through the people before them they've been told about slavery. And a lot of times people, people, I guess—when you start hearing things over and over again and you—when you hear that, that you're inferior, you're gonna start to believe it. It's not—I mean, I understand what Carl's saying, but it's not, it's not that they don't wanna try, I don't think. It's just that they believe that they can't because that's what they've been told.
(11) Teacher: How many of you read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in here? [*A few hands go up.*] And *Roll of Thunder* was written about a time during the Depression. And how were the blacks treated in that book? Were they treated as if they were equals, Patty?
(12) Patty: No.
(13) Teacher: And we're looking at a time that is roughly sixty years after the Civil War ended. So they weren't treated as equals then either, were they?

Carl responds to Judy's question by stating that he thinks African Americans "bring it upon themselves" (line 2). While assuring Judy and the other students that he's not a racist (line 4), Carl wonders why other

minorities like the Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos have started businesses and succeeded economically while African Americans have not. In response to Carl's comments Judy interjects a statement that hints at the historical experiences of African Americans: "those people [other minorities] were not brought here as slaves" (line 5). Carl responds, "Well yeah, but, I mean, there are no slaves anymore" (line 6).

Carl is correct. There are no slaves anymore. While African Americans did experience cruelty, brutality, and horrible atrocities and injustices under slavery, experiences that the students have been studying, that is a "problem" that was corrected many years ago. Slavery is "history," an event in the past that had no obvious connection to the present for Carl. As a consequence, Carl concludes that, although there are some successful blacks, a lot of African Americans simply believe that everyone is against them and, so, are not motivated to get jobs.

At this point Patty (line 10) attempts to enlighten Carl about the effects that the legacy of slavery has on present-day African Americans. It is not that African Americans do not want to succeed economically but that they believe everyone is against them and they are inferior to whites and other minority groups, because that is what they have told themselves year after year. For Patty, the condition of blacks today is the unfortunate consequence of remembering the history of their ancestors, a history that makes them believe in their own inferiority.

Judy rejoins the discussion (line 11), asking if any of the students have read Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), one of the selections that students can read in their literature course. Only a few of the students have read this book (and so Judy does not continue with this point), which recounts the experiences of Cassie Logan and her family, who are black, in the South during the Great Depression, experiences that expose the racism, discrimination, and injustices African Americans must endure in more recent American society. Judy's question is meant to turn attention away from African Americans themselves (i.e., what's wrong with these people?) to the issue of how blacks have been treated in American society—under slavery, during the Great Depression, and today. She is asserting that African Americans have not been treated as equals by whites, a continuous problem in race relations throughout U.S. history.

What are we to make of Carl's and Patty's comments? Why couldn't they make the connections between the past and the present that were so obvious to Judy? These are exactly the questions Judy asked herself after this lesson. She expressed to me her frustration and disappointment over her students' seeming inability to connect past and present. The discussion hadn't gone at all the way the teacher wanted it to. Why didn't this lesson work?

This question is important, not only because her lesson seemed to be a "failure" but because it can provide us with a vantage point for analyzing the curriculum in use in contemporary classrooms. Given that

past histories of the Civil War period have either ignored the experiences of enslaved African Americans altogether or portrayed slavery as a benign social institution, shouldn't we embrace an approach that studies the experiences of African Americans under slavery as a much needed improvement in the teaching of U.S. history?

Frankly, I was very impressed with the work that was being done in Judy's classroom. But this lesson, and Judy's reaction to it, was my first indication that the new multicultural approach might not be all it seemed to be. How should we make sense of Carl's comments? The easy answer is that, in spite of his denials, Carl is a racist, and these racist views explain his failure to acknowledge the inequities in race relations between blacks and whites throughout U.S. history. One could simply dismiss Carl by saying he "just doesn't get it" and so he's not going to benefit from a valuable approach to including African Americans in U.S. history. We could also conclude that Carl just wasn't paying attention, he wasn't doing the readings and assignments, and so he missed the connection that Judy was trying to make.

But neither one of these explanations is very satisfying. In fact, Carl is a good student, one of the more vocal ones at that. And concluding that Carl is a racist just does not fit with my yearlong observations of him in Judy's classroom. A more satisfying line of inquiry is to ask what is it about the curriculum in use that makes Carl's comments "sensible," given the way in which African Americans are presented in U.S. history, that is, as slaves in the Civil War South.

In fact, Carl provides a clue to this line of thinking when he notes that "there are no slaves anymore" (line 6). Stated simply, an unintended consequence of focusing on the experiences of slaves during the Civil War is that students' historical understandings of the experiences of African Americans with regards to racism, discrimination, and injustice become anchored in slavery. The injustices experienced by African Americans and witnessed by the students in classroom lessons and schoolwork are understood as a product of their enslavement. Outside the context of southern slavery, the curriculum in use provided these students with virtually no historical knowledge to draw upon for thinking about African Americans' continuous experiences of racism, discrimination, and injustice in the United States. For these students, these injustices ended with the abolition of slavery, with the end of the Civil War.

In effect, the curriculum in use provided students with a moral discourse for understanding slavery by focusing on issues such as the brutal or inhumane treatment of slaves and the indignities suffered by slaves in their everyday lives. But Judy speaks not a moral but a political discourse when attempting to use history to think about contemporary events in Los Angeles. She frames this discussion in terms of political issues—equality, economic opportunity, equal protection and rights under the law—but her students have learned to see and understand the

moral dimensions of African Americans' experiences. It is no wonder that Carl and Patty have difficulty transforming a moral assessment of the past into a political critique of the present.

Studying African Americans in U.S. History

The historical presence of African Americans in U.S. history was introduced fairly early in the school year.[1] In discussions of early colonial history, both Ruth and Tom noted African Americans' presence, using a population chart ("Ethnic Population, 1775") that shows African Americans making up 20 percent of the population in colonial America. Tom provided his students with a graphic depiction of the Middle Passage and the purchase of African Americans by white colonists once they had arrived in North America. Ruth briefly discussed the conditions Africans faced on their voyage from Africa, using a model of a slave ship created by a student in a previous year, with sunflower seeds representing Africans, to show how Africans were packed into the ships. Most of the talk about African Americans was concerned with their enslavement, including their abduction and passage from Africa to North America, being sold at slave auctions, and that slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation and taxation during the Constitutional Convention.

There were some exceptions to the equation of African Americans with enslavement expressed in moral terms. As part of a "colonial faire" in Ruth's class, Roy, the only African American student, brought in a replica that he built of a clock made by Benjamin Banneker, an African American man of science from colonial times. Tom discussed a few black Revolutionary War heroes with his students and asked them to write a report on a black Revolutionary War hero of their choice. This was not a great success; discovering the paucity of resources on this topic in their school and local public libraries, most students wrote very brief reports plagiarizing the little information they could find on the few individuals mentioned in their textbook—Crispus Attucks, Salem Poor, and Peter Salem (Armento et al. 1991:58, 73–74).

In fact, Crispus Attucks was the only noted African American in the colonial period. He was a "a black man who had fled slavery to become a sailor" (Armento et al. 1991:58) and the first person to die in the Boston Massacre. Both Tom and Ruth made note of Attucks in their lessons. Ruth restated what the textbook said, telling her students that Attucks was an important person to remember but never clearly explaining why. Tom also discussed Crispus Attucks, defining his two accomplishments (hence his claim to fame) as being one leader of the Boston Massacre on the American side and the first to die for the ideals of the U.S. Revolution.

The utility of Crispus Attucks as an African American in early U.S. history was also evident in Judy's class. Besides *A More Perfect Union*, the other major resource Judy used was a collection of materials published by the Teacher's Curriculum Institute (TCI 1992). In a TCI coop-

erative learning activity intended to show students the perspectives of different groups regarding specific colonial events, Crispus Attucks served as the voice of African Americans as students attempted to comment, from Attucks's point of view (and, by extension, the view of at least one part of the African American community), on the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and a political cartoon commenting on the British taxation of the colonies.

The addition and elevation of Crispus Attucks to Revolutionary War hero typifies a predominant approach to multicultural curriculum reform, namely, the injection or addition of people of color and women into the existing narrative of U.S. history (Banks 1989). But this approach does not tell the whole story of African Americans in U.S. history. It does not focus on the historical experiences of these men and women. Instead, these added voices are asked to comment on events important in a white story of the United States. While African Americans were asked to comment, in the person of Crispus Attucks, on the Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party, they were not asked to comment, for example, on debates concerning slavery in the Constitutional Convention. And while both the textbook and Tom focused on African Americans who fought on the side of the colonists in the Revolutionary War, a similar focus on African Americans who fought on the side of the British, for example, one Thomas Peters (Nash 1986), is missing.

While African Americans were present early in U.S. history, their presence was never examined in any depth. Students learned little or nothing about the experiences of African Americans in America during the colonial period. In fact, students learned very little about African Americans until their teachers began their discussion of the Civil War. The only place that African Americans really entered the narrative in more than superficial or incidental ways, was in discussions of the Civil War period, when their presence as slaves in the South is more important to the story of white America.

The Experiences of Slaves in the South

It was during the study of the Civil War period that students had the opportunity to learn about the experiences of African Americans in depth, specifically, about the experiences of enslaved African Americans in the South. In this section I focus on Judy's class because, in contrast to Ruth and Tom, she spent a considerable amount of time on the Civil War period (eight weeks in all), drawing on a wide variety of materials—the students' textbook, slides, library resources, laser-disc presentations, documentary film, literature, period music, and her own supplementary reference materials—to teach her students about the growing conflict between North and South, as well as the cruelties, indignities, and injustices that African Americans experienced under slavery.

Student work in Judy's class included small group Civil War projects that students presented to the class—slide lectures, poetry recitals, reenactments of the Lincoln-Douglas debate, monologues from famous individuals of the time, point-counterpoint presentations between pro- and antislavery historical figures, reports on music from this period, and skits on Civil War events—and the completion of a final essay in which students answered one of three questions dealing with slavery.

In addition, Judy had her students read Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave* (1968), a collection of interviews of African Americans who experienced slavery firsthand. Judy instructed her students to create a dialectical journal using this book, each student choosing a few passages from each chapter to which they were then to write a personal response in their journal. The students were fairly consistent in the passages that they choose to comment upon. They repeatedly talked about the cruelty of splitting up African American families through the buying and selling of slaves, the brutality of masters who beat their slaves for small offenses, the poor living conditions of slaves, and the long hours that slaves were forced to work, even when sick or hurt or during bad weather.

One particularly moving and memorable passage concerned Paul, an escaped slave who wore an iron collar with bells attached to it, who was found hiding in a swamp by another slave. He promised to return the following Sunday with a file and other tools to remove Paul's collar, but when he returned, he found that Paul had hung himself from a sassafras tree (Lester 1968:122–126). This passage was all the more powerful because it was repeated in the documentary *Roots of Resistance: The Underground Railroad*, which Judy showed to her students. The students listened to the narrator tell the story of Paul, which ended with the image of the empty collar hanging from the tree, the bells jingling as it sways in the breeze.

This passage elicited many sympathetic responses from the students, with many of them noting that, if they were slaves, they would prefer to be killed or kill themselves rather than return to the harsh and brutal conditions of slavery. For example, Cindy noted:

> I think I would kill myself if I was a slave and had escaped but was close to being captured. I would know that it is better in the heavens where there are no slaves and all are equal. I wouldn't want to be captured and taken back to be whipped and to have to go on working under someone else.

Here we can see that Cindy is sympathetic to the plight of the slaves and that she is also making an effort to identify with their experiences. The dialectical journals provided Judy's students with an opportunity to identify and sympathize with the experiences of enslaved African Americans, an opportunity that they took advantage of. Very often the students' personal responses to the *To Be a Slave* passages took the form of putting themselves in the place of the slaves and imagining how they would feel. For example, Bob responded to a passage concerning the

separation of slave families due to the selling of their children by imagining his reaction to this event:

> Having to leave your family on the spot or anytime for me would be painful. Families is all some of the slaves got, and sometimes that would be broken up too. To me that would be horrible.

If one goal of a multicultural history is to sensitize students to the lives and experiences of others, then Judy's curriculum was successful in this regard.

Finally, the *To Be a Slave* passages that the students read are similar to a few quotes in *A More Perfect Union*, reinforcing the lessons they have learned about the lives of African Americans under southern slavery. Here students can read Solomon Northup's description of the whippings slaves received while picking cotton (Armento et al. 1991:285). At the end of the same chapter is a literature selection containing an extended excerpt from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which he talks about his time with Mr. Covey, a master who succeeded in breaking Douglass "in body, soul, and spirit" (1991:296–297).

By the end of their unit on the Civil War, Judy's students had become "witnesses" to the experiences of African Americans under slavery. All the work the students did and the materials they read were focused on imparting some sense, however imperfect, of the indignities, injustices, and brutalities of slave life. And the students seemed sincere, both in their writing and comments in class, in their expressions of shock and outrage at the treatment of African Americans under slavery. Slavery is immoral, and they had difficulty understanding how white slaveholders could have been so mean and cruel. African Americans experienced unimaginable cruelty at the hands of slaveholders, who considered them inferior and less than human, and this was a lesson Judy's students had learned well.

One would think that Judy's students, after studying the experiences of enslaved African Americans in such great detail, would have a depth of historical knowledge that would make them well-prepared to think and talk about the experiences of contemporary African Americans with some sensitivity. But applying this historical knowledge to contemporary events was problematic for Judy's students, because the students viewed the injustices experienced by African Americans as specific to their lives under slavery, an historically specific problem that has been solved rather than one example in a continuous history marked by racism and discrimination toward African Americans in U.S. society.

The Situation of African Americans in U.S. History

Sleeter and Grant (1991) note the power of the narrative of U.S. history textbooks to situate people of color in specific time periods or events that

are important to whites. Native Americans are included as friends of the early English colonists, or in their later fights with settlers, Asian Americans are noted for their work on the railroad, and African Americans are included in slavery and the civil rights struggle (Sleeter and Grant 1991:85–86).

The bias of mainstream, white American culture, part of the "cultural baggage" that teachers and students bring with them into the classroom and that is evident in classroom lessons and curricular materials is that the Civil War South is the only proper place to study the presence of African Americans in U.S. history. It is an unquestioned assumption that slavery is the place to include African Americans in U.S. history. As currently constructed, a multicultural perspective means studying slaves and slavery in-depth, so that students gain a deep understanding of the experiences of African Americans under slavery.

But as we saw in Judy's class, this practice of situating African Americans in a particular time and place in U.S. history—in the Civil War South—and focusing on their experiences as slaves during this period has some surprising consequences. Carl's and Patty's comments suggest that this practice confines African Americans, and their experiences and concerns, to a specific time and place in U.S. history. By examining the experiences of African Americans under slavery but ignoring the experiences of African Americans outside of slavery—for example, communities of free blacks in the North and the South—is to construct a history that binds the injustices African Americans have experienced in the United States specifically to their enslavement in the South. A few examples from the work produced by Judy's students illustrates this point.

Jean, writing in her *To Be a Slave* journal, responds to a passage in the epilogue in which Thomas Hall comments that, while there are a few white men who may be all right, they will continue to talk against blacks and give them the cold shoulder due to pressure from their white friends (Lester 1968:156), in this way:

> This is still quite true in the United States, which is really sad because this [slavery] was more than one hundred years ago, which was the era of racism, prejudice, and slavery.

Jean is saying that more than one hundred years ago there was an "era" in which enslaved African Americans experienced racism and prejudice. While Jean acknowledges that whites are still prejudiced against blacks, this "is really sad" because this problem was supposedly solved many years ago. Eric, writing on a question concerning liberty and equality in his *To Be a Slave* final essay, makes a similar point:

> The worst part of slavery was that the slaves were bought and sold all the time. I think this is horrid for the slaves because they have no control over what will happen to them. Having control of your life is a major idea of liberty.

> Less than 90 years later black people were the target of racism once again. In the 1950s blacks were not blessed with the same rights and privileges that the whites were.

Eric notes that 90 years after the Civil War "black people were the target of racism once again" and that blacks were not "blessed with the same rights and privileges that the whites were." Eric, like Jean, has situated African American experiences of racism and discrimination in specific historical moments—in the Civil War South and then again, for Eric, in the 1950s. While there are still problems in black-white relations, they imply there is no continuous history of racism and discrimination toward African Americans in the United States, but only problems that have periodically plagued African Americans.

Finally, Diana and Sue, both writing in their narrative descriptions of U.S. history, express the belief that slavery is a thing of the past:

> My most favorite thing we did was learning about slaves. It's really hard to accept what they [white slaveowners and black slaves] did to each other. But that was the past. [Diana]

> [North and South are arguing over slavery.] Soon the North and the South had begun the Civil War. Many people died. But in the end, as you know, there is no more slavery anymore. [Sue]

While it is "really hard to accept" what happened to African Americans under slavery, "that was the past," something between white slaveholders and black slaves, and, as Sue says, echoing Carl's comment above, "there is no more slavery anymore."

Recognizing this unintended "confinement" of the experiences of African Americans with racism, brutality, and injustice to those of black slaves in the South helps to explain the problems that Judy had in using her students' history to discuss the events in Los Angeles and the experiences of contemporary African Americans. When her students turn to history, all they find is slavery, a horribly brutal period for African Americans in U.S. history, but a situation that exists no more. Carl tried to understand the situation of African Americans today, but he could not see the connection between slavery and contemporary events. Patty did her best to make use of this history, positing that the legacy of slavery is an unfounded belief by blacks in their own inferiority.

Both Carl's and Patty's comments deny any continuous history of racism, discrimination, or prejudice experienced by African Americans in American society. Their only detailed knowledge of the injustices experienced by African Americans occurred during slavery, and so for Patty the only connection between the past and the present in this regard is African Americans' memory of this historical event, while for Carl there is no connection at all. There are neither contemporary analogous events nor any sequence of events between the enslavement of African

Americans during the Civil War and the present, which would provide for a continuous history of common experiences shared by African Americans who lived in the United States in the past and those who live in the United States in the present.

Judy tried to move the conversation in a new direction: she tried to get her students to focus on the inequities in black-white relations. The problem is that her students had little knowledge of the history of black-white relations. What they did know, in detail, was the character of the relations between enslaved blacks and their white masters. But there are no slaves anymore, and no white masters. Slavery, it seems, was simply not a very useful vehicle for understanding the experiences of African Americans in the United States. But could it be?

Revising the Curriculum: Including Diverse Historical Voices

One reason that Judy's focus on the experiences of African Americans as slaves was less than successful in achieving her goals was because African Americans were virtually absent from the rest of U.S. history. While they were mentioned in the early colonial period, students had no detailed knowledge of African Americans in other times and places, which might have suggested to them that the injustices faced by African Americans under slavery were not specific to slavery but a feature of race relations throughout U.S. history. A stronger presence for African Americans throughout U.S. history would certainly go a long way toward addressing some of the problems we have seen in Judy's classroom.

The lesson for multicultural curriculum reform in history is one that has been argued before. The way to include diverse groups is to place them in many different times and places and study them as historical actors with political voices. The Houghton Mifflin textbook series attempts to expand the existing narrative of U.S. history by including the voices of more women and people of color. It is the inclusion of these voices, in fact, that suggests a potential means of organizing curriculum in a way that would help students connect the past and present experiences of African Americans in the United States.

One of the new, progressive features of *A More Perfect Union* is its inclusion of quotes from historical figures, not only the traditional quotes from white males but also quotes from women, African Americans, Native Americans, and others. These quotes are intended to convey the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of these often forgotten people. But there is a definite "politics of speaking" concerning these voices: limits on what they get to speak about as well as how they get to speak about it. For example, in *A More Perfect Union* white males and females (the latter a sign of progress) get to speak with a political voice, discussing issues of liberty, equality, and freedom. While students can still hear Patrick Henry's declaration to "give me liberty, or give me death" (Armento et al. 1991:664–665) or read Thomas Paine's *Common*

Sense (Armento et al. 1991:666–667), they can also read a section entitled "Susan's Trial," in which Susan B. Anthony can declare (in response to her being found guilty of the crime of voting in the 1872 presidential election) that "my natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights are all alike ignored" (Armento et al. 1991:276–277).

But other groups never get to speak with a political voice. Native Americans are limited to speaking with a defeated, victim's voice (on page 201, Tecumseh says, "They [whites] have driven us from the sea to the lakes—we can go no farther," and on page 425, Chief Joseph says, "I will fight no more forever,"), while African Americans are confined to addressing the immorality of slavery and the brutalities of slave life (e.g., Solomon Northup, on p. 285). In fact, it is this exclusive focus on the immorality of slavery, of showing students the "evils" of slavery if you will—mean and cruel masters, the brutal treatment of slaves, the belief in the inferiority of slaves who were less than human—that is problematic in Judy's unit on the Civil War and their study of the experiences of African Americans during this period.

While this focus on the brutality and immorality of slavery is valid and important, it provides a history that is too narrow and limited to be of much use in discussing contemporary issues. It provides very weak links to issues of racism, discrimination, and the denial of political and civil rights, the very issues that the California *History-Social Science Framework* alludes to when it talks about teaching students a history of the United States as "an unfinished struggle to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution" (1988:5) and the issues that Judy attempted to discuss with her students concerning the events in Los Angeles.

Politicizing the voices of African Americans, Native Americans, and other racial and ethnic groups has the potential to broaden the focus of the history students learn and provide themes, concepts, and issues that provide more easily realized connections between the past and the present. To illustrate my point, here is an excerpt from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* which appears in the students' textbook:

> (1) We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. . . . Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! [Armento et al. 1991:296–297]

Now compare that excerpt to a quotation that did not appear in the students' textbook, an excerpt from a speech that Douglass gave on July 5, 1852, entitled "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" and reprinted in the appendix of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom:*

> (2) The blessings in which you this day rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. . . . To him [the slave], your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. [Douglass 1984:441–445, emphasis in original]

The first quote adds to the students' knowledge of the cruelties of slave life and is representative of the approach of the curriculum overall, which is to focus on the immorality of slavery. I am not suggesting that this is not worthy of study, but it seems to add to the problems faced by Judy's students in trying to make connections between the past and the present and to their difficulty in using a moral discourse to engage political issues. The second quote comes from a completely different Frederick Douglass, one who has the potential to facilitate students' abilities to connect the past to the present. This is an angry Frederick Douglass who attacks white America not simply for the cruel treatment of enslaved African Americans but for their refusal to extend "the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence" to African Americans. It is the political discourse of this second Douglass that places the experiences of African Americans under slavery within a broader political narrative of U.S. history and provides a discourse for talking about the past which connects the past with the present.

The inclusion of this second Douglass in the curriculum has potential benefits for both white and African American students. For white students, like the majority of Judy's students, the political discourse of this second Douglass provides a bridge between the past and present. The experiences of enslaved African Americans are no longer presented in terms of the immorality and brutality of slavery but as a denial of the basic political and civil liberties and freedoms embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It is the recognition of the denial of African Americans' civil and political rights that is crucial to understanding the experiences of African Americans in U.S. society, past and present.

This second quote from Douglass also holds benefits for African American students, for through him African American students are brought into, and become a part of, the rich political heritage of the United States. Although, as alluded to in the California *History-Social Science Framework*, the extension of the rights and liberties guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution has been a hard fought struggle that continues even today, women and people of color

have contributed to this heritage, often in the face of great resistance and personal danger. They are part of our political community, drawing upon and contributing to our political heritage in many important ways. Understanding this struggle is also significant for white students, as it provides them with a more complete and diverse account of our political history, and the diversity of Americans who have contributed to this positive struggle. And of course, Douglass provides a wonderful role model for all students, an example of an American who stepped forward and demanded that we hold our social practices accountable to our political ideals.

The example of Frederick Douglass is not unique. The students' textbook favors apolitical, noncontroversial quotes from historical figures of color. While these figures are allowed to speak, they are not allowed to speak freely. This is one way in which the textbook contributes to a U.S. history that often obscures the connection between past and present, sometimes mentioning (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991) but rarely examining the history of injustice, discrimination, and racism which different racial, ethnic, and religious groups have experienced continuously in the United States. When African Americans such as Crispus Attucks address events important in a white story of America but never events important to African Americans themselves—such as the failure of the founding fathers to abolish slavery in the Constitution—it becomes easier to see how the new Houghton Mifflin textbooks and TCI materials may be more inclusive but are still a long way from presenting a multiperspectival, truly multicultural history of the United States.

Some Lessons for Creating a Multicultural History Curriculum

There are three general lessons for multicultural reform in history and social science that we can learn from my study of the curriculum in use in three classrooms. First, although most calls for reform are concerned with what students know (or rather, what they do not know), this case study points out the importance of looking at how students come to know history. In this case, while slavery is realized as a moral reality, it is not realized as a political reality. As a consequence, the students' knowledge of history is a less useful resource than it could be in thinking about contemporary events. I do not want to abandon a moral perspective on slavery, but I do think it is important for students to develop a political perspective on slavery. While a multicultural history should make students aware of the different perspectives and experiences of all kinds of Americans in our common past, I would argue that an emphasis on our common political history is crucial to this undertaking, because it provides students with a way of talking about history—a political discourse—that provides a bridge between the past and the present.

Second, the meaningful inclusion of women and people of color into the narrative of U.S. history means, at minimum, including them as

participants in multiple historical events. The students' anchoring of the discrimination and injustice experienced by African Americans in slavery and their inability to see this as part of a larger, continuous history of black-white relations, is in large part due to the virtual absence of African Americans in other times and places in U.S. history. Teachers need to begin to examine the experiences of African Americans outside of slavery, but their ability to do this will in part depend upon the availability of good materials. For example, while *A More Perfect Union* does focus extensively on slavery, it also discusses, albeit briefly, the existence of communities of free blacks in both the North and the South (1991:193–195, 304–305). This is an opportunity, if seized by teachers, to provide their students with a more complete history of the experiences of African Americans in the United States, one that is likely to raise issues of injustice, discrimination, and racism.

Third, the history curriculum should make apparent to students that the realization of equality, whether political, social, or economic, has been a continuous struggle throughout U.S. history, involving the courageous efforts of all kinds of Americans, men and women of all races and ethnicities. This is a story that these students still have not heard, but one that schooling has a responsibility to teach them. The way to achieve this is to expand the narrative of U.S. history, both by populating traditionally important events with people whose participation has previously been ignored and by including new events that highlight the actions of these previously ignored Americans in our common history. And most importantly, we need to refuse to shy away from the kind of political critique provided by Frederick Douglass in his Fourth of July speech. Isn't it our political ideals, and our continuing struggle to achieve these ideals, that unite us as a people and a nation?

These are easy suggestions to make, but they will be difficult to achieve in practice. The problem is not simply biased curriculum, but that teachers and students bring their own biases to their reading of history—popular stereotypes of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as assumptions about where and when different groups belong in U.S. history. When it comes to African Americans and U.S. history, Judy and her students know about slavery and often little else. Together, they are enacting a cultural narrative that specifies the "proper" place of African Americans in U.S. history. It is this tacit cultural knowledge that is central to understanding the politics of representation (Crichlow et al. 1990; Holquist 1983; Mehan and Wills 1988; Shapiro 1988): the decisions of teachers and students to privilege some representations of historical figures and events over others, surrounding the use of curriculum in the construction of historical knowledge in classrooms.

This implies that curriculum reform involves much more than simply writing "truly" multicultural texts. Constructing multicultural histories in the classroom will involve challenging the tacit biases and assumptions of teachers and students which mediate their reading of texts, even

multicultural texts, and as such can undermine even the best curriculum reform efforts. A multicultural history curriculum is extremely useful for white, suburban students, who often have little contact with people of color in their everyday lives and are, therefore, much more dependent upon cultural stereotypes and assumptions when trying to imagine the situations of others in American society. These efforts are sure to be met with resistance and anger from parents, teachers, and students, as we have already seen in the debate over multicultural curriculum reform throughout the United States. These efforts are necessary, however, if we are going to prepare all our students to live together amidst the diversity of American society.

Who Needs Multicultural Education? White Students and the Construction of a Usable Past

One way of judging the utility or success of multicultural reform in history and social science is to ask how well the curriculum in use provides students with the discursive resources for positioning themselves in public debates concerning important social issues. Schools can provide students with an important space for practicing the role of active citizen, and for thinking critically about American society and culture. Conceptualized this way, efforts at multicultural curriculum reform can be critiqued in terms of whether or not they provide students with a usable past, a history that "includes the experiences and involvement of people of all classes and conditions" (Nash 1989:248) and that will "serve as a useful tool for understanding current affairs" (McNeill 1989:157).

The history constructed in the classrooms that I studied is a step forward in terms of creating a more inclusive history of the United States. Examining the cruelties and brutalities that African Americans endured under slavery during the Civil War period is worthwhile and an advancement from the past, but it is simply not enough. The focus on the history and immorality of slavery is so historically specific that it is hard to find any connections between past and present.

While the students' history does not provide them with an entirely usable or useful past for thinking about contemporary race relations, it is rife with possibilities, possibilities that I have tried to illuminate in this article. With regards to what counts as a multicultural history in the classroom, the curriculum is not as radical as some critics of multiculturalism feared, the story not much different than it was 20 or more years ago. True, the students do spend time learning about the experiences of African Americans under slavery, but the history of America is still overwhelmingly white and still populated with the same familiar historical figures and events that critics worried would be lost to future generations of students. But I also do not think proponents of reform should despair, because while the curriculum may be flawed, it is a flaw that can be fixed. By continuing to expand the narrative of U.S. history

to make it more inclusive, we can create a history curriculum that is truly multicultural.

Finally, who needs a multicultural history curriculum? Certainly students of color do, but so do white students like Carl and Patty, who clearly have something to gain as well. Perhaps Carl and Patty "just don't get it," but to assume that this is due to simple ignorance or that because they are white they are incapable of understanding the experiences and perspectives of people of color is to ignore the constitutive and constructive work that has gone into their not "getting it." History is not a found reality but rather a culturally and socially constructed reality, part of a "selective tradition" (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991). Therefore, it is useful to think of history as a resource that is both enabling and constraining for students as citizens.

While the study of enslaved African Americans during the Civil War is a positive step forward, it is also at the same time something of a "trap" for white students. It provides a very limited and narrow understanding of African Americans' experiences in U.S. history, one that provides few tools for thinking critically about contemporary race relations. Oftentimes we hear comments from whites that are very similar to Carl's, comments that quickly turn a discussion of contemporary race relations into a discussion of slavery, followed by protestations that "even if my ancestors owned slaves I did not, and anyway that is a problem that was solved a long time ago." Maybe it is time to recognize these comments not as a reflection of ignorance but as the "educated," albeit incomplete, comments that they are. If race relations are not "their problem" but "our problem," then we need to think about the many ways schooling can outfit all students with the tools that they will need to deal effectively with these issues as active citizens. If history is a resource for citizens, then we can provide students with better resources than we have, and they deserve it.

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Notes

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1. In California eighth-grade U.S. history goes through the end of World War I. In 11th grade students study 20th-century U.S. history.

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