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Linda Heidenreich

Washington State University

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CHAPTER
EIGHT



Linda Heidenreich

*'En Las Escuelas de San Francisco
Se Enseñan el Frances y el Aleman...':
Nineteenth-Century Eclectic Readers,
Common Schools and the Construction
of Second-Class Citizenship in
Nineteenth-Century California*

My title is taken, in part, from the testimonio of Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, who when reflecting on the many changes that had transpired in California following the U.S. Invasion, raised the issue of education. He was concerned that Spanish was no longer taught in the schools, not even in San Francisco, the largest city in the north. As part of their regular education, school children were able to study French and German, but did not have the opportunity to study Spanish. The retired general's concern was tied to larger issues of political power, education, and the status of ethnic Mexicans in the U.S. —and with good cause.¹ Removing Spanish from the public school curriculum in some places, while failing to include it at all in others, was part of a

larger trend that created a definition of American citizen that necessarily excluded ethnic Mexicans from the curriculum and the republic. The decedents of Californianas/os were welcomed as school children, if, and only if, they would—and could, assimilate.

Many of the issues with which California residents and people in the greater U.S. West struggle today find their roots in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Following the U.S. Invasion of 1846-48, throughout the conquered territories, Euro-Americans replaced a Mexicano ranch economy with an industrial-capitalist one, displaced Mexicanos as the dominant land holding group, and achieved political dominance in local and state politics² As part of this process, public education for the next generation of “American citizens” played a significant role in establishing and maintaining Euro-American dominance.

In this paper I will focus on issues of citizenship and “American” identity as represented in California’s public schools during the late nineteenth century. I will do this by analyzing discourses of citizenship in the specific town of Napa, the focus of my larger study. Using common school textbooks and locally produced newspapers, I will argue that together these texts normalized an understanding of Euro-American as American. This narrow definition of citizen and “American” created a legacy of rigidity and exclusiveness with which educators and disfranchised people within the United States continue to struggle today.

McGuffey’s Reader’s were used throughout the greater American West, including not only what is now called the Southwest, but as far east as Ohio and Kentucky from the early nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, they continue to be used by fundamentalist Christian schools and advocates of home schooling today.³ First published in 1836, they sold 7,000,000 copies between 1836 and 1850. Between 1850 and 1870 following the U.S. – Mexico War and then the U.S. Civil War they sold 40,000,000 copies, making McGuffey the dominant eclectic reader in the U.S. West.⁴ The popularity of the

eclectic readers was not coincidental. Instead, their success was owed in part, to the fact that the readers were first published at a time when the public school movement was spreading throughout the U.S. and when the common schools, or public schools, of the West were becoming differentiated by graded classrooms.⁵

The time frame in which the readers rose to dominance is also important because during the late nineteenth century the very understanding of what it means to be an “American” was disrupted and redefined. Following the U.S. war against Mexico, Euro-American immigrants to what was formerly Mexico strove to redefine the territories as legitimately “American.” Just two decades later, while that very definition remained contested, the attempted extension of basic citizenship rights to freedmen caused yet another crisis among Euro-Americans in the U.S. East and West.

According to Richard Mosier, the late nineteenth century was also a time when Jacksonian democracy was contained. If all white male citizens were to participate in the republic, then citizen needed to be defined narrowly and all citizens need to share a reverence for property. The *McGuffey Readers*, according to Mosier, were part of a larger Republican counter-reformation that wedded property, religion and the judicial system, in part by rationalizing the poverty of the disfranchised⁶. In the *McGuffey Readers*, I argue, these two constructions, of Euro-Americans as peculiarly American, and of a reverence for property ownership together justified the socio-economic inequalities of the nineteenth century for young Euro-American school children.

This central role of eclectic readers is best understood in the context of discourses of nation – specifically in the context of the work of Benedict Anderson, where, in *Imagined Communities*, he made the now classic argument that what constitutes modern nation-states is not common race, religion, or language, but instead their status as a specific kind of “imagined community.” “The people” conceive of themselves as a fraternity and imagine themselves to be part of the community.

This imagined community is made possible not only by governmental mechanisms, but by mechanisms of culture and education—particularly newspapers.⁷ Here I would add that the role of the popular press extends to the texts used in the public schools. And for the nineteenth century, what young people were taught in the public schools dovetailed with what was printed in the popular press to create an understanding of “American” that placed young white protestant Americans in opposition to other citizens and residents of the West.⁸

In the local press of Napa Euro-American claims of supremacy were normalized through various means. One of these was the valorization of the U.S. War against Mexico. Within two decades of the U.S.-Mexico War, events surrounding the War began to be memorialized in the local paper. Euro-American participants in the war began to post notices of commemorative events in the local papers and papers adopted a language that clearly labeled Euro-American men and women as “Americans.”⁹ All other residents of the town were Othered – and labeled either by broad ethnic categories or by overtly racist labels. In Napa, as in other areas of the U.S. West, these others included Californianas/os, Mexican immigrants, African Americans, Chinese immigrants, and American Indians.¹⁰

A second means by which an ideology of white supremacy made its appearance in the local press was in the form of science articles by and about Louis Agassiz, the Swiss émigré to the United States who argued that one of the primary responsibilities of scientists was to “to settle the relative rank” among the races. Not surprisingly for this time period, Agassiz argued that Northern Europeans and their descendents were at the top of the racial scale. Agassiz went so far as to embrace the theory of polygenesis, which held that “in the beginning” God created two unequal species of man, one white, the other black.¹¹ In Napa, the local press ran numerous articles of and by Agassiz – at times using reprints of the articles for filler. In addition the white townspeople of Napa named one of their stream ships after him.

Finally, during this same time a mythology of American Citizens as the descendants of a peculiarly white race made its appearance in Napa's press and the newspapers adopted an unabashed racist approach to defining American citizenship. In 1869, for example, amid the strife surrounding the reconstruction of the American South, a poem entitled "To the White Men of America" appeared in the *Napa County Reporter*. It read:

Americans! Who proudly trace
Lineage from a noble race;
Who fill a high and honored place
'mong the nations of the earth:
Where is all your freedom grand?
See! A wretched Negro band
Ruling o'er your southern land,
Where white men now are slaves...

Is our CHARTER now repealed,
Which our father's blood has sealed?—
Shall we, Freeman, basely yield
The birthright of our race?
Shall we stand where Judas stood –
Break the bond of brotherhood –
Force the men of our own blood
To bow to Negro rule?...¹²

These are three of the strategies that I have found whereby Napa's nineteenth-century press naturalized Euro-American dominance and white supremacy. What is interesting and troubling about these strategies in relation to the history of education in the United States and to the status of Chicana/o education today, is the manner in which this rhetoric of white supremacy dovetailed with public school textbooks' reification of Euro-Americans as true Americans and

inheritors of English traditions. At the same time that readers of the English –language press sat and read overtly racist diatribes in Napa’s papers, the young boys and girls of the area sat and read in their Eclectic Readers of how-

...the people of the United States, descendants of the English stock, grateful for the treasures of knowledge derived from their English ancestors, acknowledge, also, with thanks and filial regard, that, among those ancestors, under the culture of Hampden and Sidney, and other assiduous friends, that seed of popular liberty first germinated, which on our soil, has shot up to its full height, until its branches overshadow the land. ¹³

In the fifth readers, which, ironically were not written by William McGuffey, but by his brother Hamilton McGuffey, students read not only of their “English ancestors,” but also of virtues of their Puritan “forefathers.”¹⁴ This construction of Englishmen and Puritans as the mythic forefathers of the schoolchildren of the U.S. West existed side by side with an overtly anti-Semitic rhetoric which blamed Jews for the death of Christ and claimed that they were strangers to “the morality found in the gospel,” as well as language that referred to American Indians as “savages” even when discussing their virtues.¹⁵ What we have in the readers, then is a normalizing of Euro-Americans as true Americans. In conjunction with the overtly racist language of the local press, such texts normalized the disfranchisement of the “others” with whom Napa’s white school children shared resources in their far western town.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Napa’s schools and schools throughout the U.S. West continued to use McGuffey as their central, at times their only text. In retrospect, scholars criticize these texts for the ways in which they inculcated doctrines of manifest destiny into a generation of young white Californians by praising American’s mission to spread liberty “among other nations and backward peoples.”¹⁶

At the time, however, the press criticized them only for their price tag – and so the rhetoric of White Supremacy of which Reginald Horsman, Ronald Takaki, Tomás Almaguer and others have written of at the state and national levels, was reproduced at the local level in the press and public schools of Napa.¹⁷

For displaced Californios, African Americans and Chinese immigrants these ideologies and mythologies did not represent empty fiction, but instead was reflective and constitutive of the racist society within which they lived. By 1860, the majority of people of Mexican decent in Napa were lived in a barrio called Spanish-town. Over 90% of Mexicano and Californio men living in this barrio appeared as laborers in the census. Women living in the barrios, both married and single were often listed as “keeping borders.”¹⁸ In 1861, an ethnic Mexican man by the name of Manuel Vera was lynched for shooting a Euro-American man. Earlier in the month, the Euro-American had shot and wounded him ¹⁹

Chinese Immigrants were similarly segregated into work camps and Chinatown throughout the Napa Valley.²⁰ The local press often reported “school boys” performing what they called “pranks” on the residents of these areas, cutting off men’s queues and knocking laundry out of their hands when they walked down the streets.²¹ In the 1890s, at the height of the anti-Chinese movement in California, Napa’s Euro-Americans formed a White Labor Union and drove the Chinese immigrant population from the area.²²

The role of the *McGuffey Readers* in creating an intolerant society is important to us as educators and activists today, I believe, for several reasons. First, it is important to acknowledge the very critical role that public education plays in the formation of national identity in this country. The lessons that students learn in the classroom are not learned in vacuum, but in the context of what is written and produced in the popular media whether that be the press, the radio, or television. In addition, the specific interpretation of American identity that school

texts produced in the nineteenth century created a legacy of intolerance that continues to influence our social climate today. For example, between 1982 and 1993, Mott Media, which supplies textbooks to home schools, sold 100,000 sets of *McGuffey's Readers*.²³ While some educators now acknowledge that the McGuffey readers represented “a map for building a national culture, drawn by one group of people who expected the entire country to be like themselves,” others, clearly, still ascribe to this map.²⁴

If Homi K. Bhabah is correct in his argument that the nation-state itself is never in a state of equilibrium, but that instability and changing historical circumstances dictate continual rearticulations of the nation, then it remains critical they we, as educators and activists, remain engaged with the politics of what goes on in our public schools.²⁵ The popular media in conjunction with public schools played a critical role in establishing white supremacy in the country of Napa and the greater U.S. West throughout the late nineteenth century. What becomes of public education in the 21st century will be determined by all of us.



Footnotes

¹ Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, “Recuerdos Históricos y Personales Tocante al la Alta California,” in *CRÍTICA*, 142.

² Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³ Skipp Porteous, “Anti-Semitism: Its Prevalence within the Christian Right,” *Freedom Writer May 1994*. This is also apparent by surveying Christian Right and Home schooling websites such as “Book, Line, and Thinker.”

⁴ Stanley W. Lindberg, *The Annotated McGuffey: Selections from the McGuffey Eclectic Readers* (San Francisco: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), xv; Richard, Mosier, *Making the American Mind: Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1965), 168.

⁵ Gerry Bohning, “The McGuffey Eclectic Readers: 1836-1986,” *The Reading Teacher* 40, no. 3 (December 1986): 266.

⁶ Mosier, 98-105.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 15-16.

⁸ Today, analysts of McGuffey's readers often note their protestant tone in relation to industry and morality. See Franklin Parker and Betty J. Parker, "A Historical Perspective on School Reform," *The Educational Forum* 59 (Spring, 1995): 279; James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 32-45; Stanley W. Lindberg, *The Annotated McGuffey: Selections from the McGuffey Eclectic Readers* (San Francisco: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1979), xvi; Mosier, 84.

⁹ See, for example, "The Death of Captain Grenville P. Swift," *Napa Reporter*, May 1, 1875, p. 3; "Another Pioneer Gone," *Napa Reporter*, March 18, 1876, p. 3; "Meeting of Pioneers," *Napa Reporter*, March 14, 1874.

¹⁰ When writers and editors for the *Napa County Reporter* wrote favorably of working class Mexicanas/os in the 1860s and 1870s, they often referred to them as "our Mexican population" (see May 11, 1872, p. 3; May 6, 1871, p. 2). When denouncing crime and /or the people living in that same barrio, they wrote of "the degraded men and women who live in that portion of the city," (see, for example August 22, 1874, p. 2). When worried about the young Euro-American men being corrupted by visiting Spanish-town, they wrote of working class ethnic Mexican men and women as "lousy, diseased Greasers" (February 9, 1867, p. 3). See also the *Napa County Reporter*, August 15, 1868 "The residents of the savory suburb known as Spanishtown, are emulating in their way the famous strife of the Kill Kenny cats. One day this week, one of the dusky females was looking anxiously for an officer to arrest someone who had slashed a vicious cut in her head with a knife..."

¹¹ Reginald Horsman, 132-135.

¹² "To the White Men of American," *Napa County Reporter*, July 18, 1868. Italics in the original.

¹³ "Europe and America" in McGuffey's *New Fifth Eclectic Reader: Selected and Original Exercises for Schools* (New York: Cincinnati, Winthrop B. Smith and Co., 1857), 271.

¹⁴ "Character of the Puritan Fathers of New England" in McGuffey's *New Fifth Eclectic Reader: Selected and Original Exercises for Schools* (New York: Cincinnati, Winthrop B. Smith and Co., 1857), 249.

¹⁵ Porteous, 6. Porteous was referring to passages in the Fourth Reader. See Bohning for a discussion of the authorship of the readers.

¹⁶ Richard, Mosier, *Making the American Mind: Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1965), 40.

¹⁷ Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 32-33; Reginald Horseman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 208-248; Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 160-163.

¹⁸ U. S. Census, Napa County, 1860 (based on a formula for those pages that would have been located in east Napa for those men whose occupation status was listed).

¹⁹ *Napa County Reporter*, 9 May 1863, p. 2. Here note that Manuel Vera, the man the Euro-Americans lynched was under custody for the shooting at the time they killed him. Note also that the Euro-Americans who took him from the Sheriff had blackened their faces as part of their ritual.

²⁰ Charlotte T. Miller, "Grapes, Queues and Quicksilver," 1966, mimeographed, Napa County Public Library, Napa, California, 56-63.

²¹ Miller, 88-97.

²² Miller, 146-148.

²³ Porteous, 4.

²⁴ Barbara Ruth Peltzman, "The McGuffey Readers," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 498.

²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation." In *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 310-312.