

LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND RESISTANCE WITHIN THE

cultures and lives. Bruner (1990), for example, has suggested that literate ways mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes. Indeed, the idea that literacy is not only the ability to understand

PREDISPOSITIONS TOWARD LITERACY WITHIN THE  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE COMMUNITY

It is a peculiar sensation this double-consciousness this sense of always looking

work responsibilities, often followed in the tradition of African Trickster myths. Trickster figures, such as the rabbit and the "Signifyin' Monkey," were small clever characters, who outwitted larger more powerful adversaries. These figures held an undeniable attraction for African-American slaves largely because they were integral to the effectiveness of storytelling as a cultural form that simultaneously resisted the world view of the dominant culture (i.e., that of the slave owners) and affirmed the slaves' own world view (i.e., that derived from African cultures) (Joyner, 1986).

This subversive aspect of African-American storytelling interacted with Euro-American literate activities, and the interaction between the two cultural systems resulted in what ultimately constituted new and distinctive cultural forms that com-

Although many African-American slaves desired to become literate, they faced several practical impediments to doing so. With a negligible number of literate slaves or free Blacks in positions to teach reading and writing skills, those slaves desiring literacy were forced to procure their initial instruction from the White plantation community (Genovese, 1974). However, because of the slaveholding society's legal opposition to literate slaves, those determined to become literate had to find what Bullock (1967) termed "hidden passages" of educative opportunity in the midst of official prohibition. "Hidden passages" were provided by the clergy, sympathetic members of the slave masters' households, and occasionally even slave masters themselves who were either sympathetic to the slaves or in need of a literate slave to perform an important plantation function.

#### SUBVERSIVE PRACTICES INSTRUMENTAL IN THE ACQUISITION OF LITERACY

##### *The Role of the White Clergy and the Church*

Religious instruction, which sometimes included literacy instruction, was perceived by Whites to be a "most efficient police" in terms of quelling the rebellious inclinations of the slaves (Aptheker, 1943). What the White clergy did not realize, however, was that such instruction would feed directly into the slaves communal efforts toward becoming free. The African-American slave community combined literacy with the liberatory orientations of their religious practices in order to circumvent much of the insidious and oppressive intent of religious instruction by applying its own cultural principles, particularly those of the Trickster. Reflecting the Trickster

head men [sic] and too much praying and Church meeting" (Faust, 1980, p. 91).

Although resistance to oppression was part of the general religious orientation of African-American slaves, such resistance was most organized in those communities

that were led by literate members.

hidden passages within the church, and once they acquired literacy, they taught one another (Genovese 1974)

As the previous discussion of the role of African-American preachers in fostering literacy acquisition within the slave community implies, the male experience has been given privileged status in most historical accounts. As was the case in western history as well as the experience of African-American women within the slave community tended

to be silenced. In the public domain of the church, for example, male authority expected women "to keep silent and not presume to speak for God to them" (Gates, 1988a, p. xxxvi). Yet, the influence that women exercised in the home was just as profound as that of the public influence of men. "Black men . . . excelled in the art of public preaching in the male dominated church, but in the church of the home





and the slave masters' families, many slaves trickstered their way into the literate world, a world associated with freedom and dignity.

### THE ESCALATION OF LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE POST BELLUM WORLD

In a now classic slave narrative, Douglass (1845) described the transformation he experienced as a function of having learned to read and write as giving him a "view of my wretched condition. . . . It opened my eyes to a horrible pit" (p. 279). Similarly, Hall (1863) articulated the relationships among literacy, freedom and oppression that he experienced or witnessed:

I stopped it and gave up reading until I was 19 years old. But the more I read, the more I fought against slavery. Finally, I thought I would make an attempt to get free, and have liberty or death. . . . I told one of my brothers that I was going to be

Having endured the legalized impediments to their human development, literacy was  
[redacted] a means of acquiring a better lifestyle or standard of material

community held that literacy and freedom were integrally related. This cultural model suggests a starting point for new literacy pedagogies for African-American children: According to such a model, there are a number of changes in classroom practice that we might make in the effort to construct new pedagogies.

following statement uttered by an African-American slave in response to a suggestion that he learn how to read: "Mrs. Kemble suggested to the son of a literate plantation

straight to my heart, 'Missus, what for me learn to read? Me have no prospect' "  
(Genovese, 1974, p. 566).

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