

PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom

David Lucander

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Lucander, David (2005) "PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss4/5>

Review

Lucander, David

Fall 2005

Williams, Heather Andrea *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR:Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95, hardcover ISBN 080782920X

Secret schooling

Freedom meant right to free public education

With recent memories of commemorations celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* fresh in many of our minds, **Self-Taught** seems almost perfectly timed in its release. Like several other excellent monographs published by the UNC Press's prestigious John Hope Series in African American History and Culture, including *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America* by Beth Tompkins Bates (2001) and *The Black Arts Movement* by James Edward Smethurst (2004), this delightfully well-written and swift reading scholarly monograph may well be considered a classic in its field. Indeed, some may argue that Heather Andrea Williams has authored the most important book on the history of African-American educational values and philosophies since James D. Anderson's study of the topic during the post-Reconstruction Tuskegee era, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (1988).

Although **Self-Taught** covers a broad array of topics, this engaging scholarly monograph is deftly woven into a well-rounded story by Williams's superb penchant for writing history in a narrative voice. This important book belongs on the reading list of more than scholars of the African-American experience or historians of the mid-19th century South, for it is a captivating read that may be familiar to contemporary educators who work in physically inappropriate facilities with outdated or scarce teaching materials. Likewise, teachers of students new to the English language or of those who have simply been passed through the educational system would surely agree with Williams's reminder that illiteracy did not diminish intellect. If not being used as an assigned text, sections from this book would surely enrich any course on the

history of education in America.

As Leon Litwack demonstrated in the landmark *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979), the period between slavery's decline and the onset of Reconstruction is anything but simple to characterize. Nevertheless, Williams presents a clear mosaic of the African-American struggle to obtain literacy during the chaotic years between 1861 and 1871. Individual experiences with the educational system and motivations driving freedpeople toward literacy are demonstrated to be as diverse as humanity itself. This mosaic, however, when viewed in its totality, reveals that African Americans had associated the right to a free public education with freedom in much the same way that they interpreted freedom to mean landownership, economic autonomy, and political rights.

Chapter 1, *In Secret Places: Acquiring Literacy in Slave Communities*, lays the intellectual foundation on which Williams constructs this compelling narrative. While Frederick Douglass's cunning and determined methods of acquiring literacy are well-known, Williams tells the story of ordinary people throughout the South who learned to read and write with a similar dedication and tenacity. Regardless of whether or not enslaved African Americans got their hands on abolitionist tracts, Williams depicts acquiring the rudiments of literacy as an important act of personal autonomy that complicated the already complex master-slave relationship of the antebellum South. Additionally, Williams adds another layer to our historical understanding of the African-American oral tradition by offering insights from black Americans who snuck into forested areas to take lessons in reading and writing from other slaves. Previously anonymous people like Louisa Gause of South Carolina inform us, What learning dey would get in dem days, dey been get it at night. While the voices speaking through this chapter vary, readers are left with the unifying theme that enslaved blacks equated literacy with liberty. Additionally, and certainly provocatively, Williams displaces white educators employed by the American Missionary Association from the center of freedpeople's education with her thesis that by building schools and expecting an education, African Americans laid the foundation for free public education in Dixieland. Building on the foundation laid in the first chapter of enslaved African Americans taking great physical risks for attaining an education, the second chapter, *A Coveted Possession: Literacy in the First Days of Freedom*, argues that white northern educator-missionaries simply provided a supply of educators for which there already was a great demand. In short, Williams argues that the famed carpetbagging schoolmarm worked with a people whose culture held deeply

rooted educational values that were established long before Reconstruction.

Without marginalizing important chapters in this book on ideological battles about race and slavery that were played out in teaching materials, the work of educational advocates, the difficulties encountered while establishing an educational system in a region that did not have (or necessarily want) a tradition of free public education, and centrality of Civil War veterans in constructing school houses, chapter 8, *If Anybody Wants an Education, It Is Me: Students in Freedpeople's Schools*, is the heart and soul of **Self-Taught**. Williams's narrative skills shine brightest in this chapter as she brings to life the struggles and values of anonymous black Americans who managed to build and sustain educational institutions despite being beset by sometimes unimaginable poverty and often violent racism. Throughout this chapter, readers must come to grips with the fact that there is no easy way to characterize a black monolith. By mining AMA manuscripts, Freedmen's Bureau files, and Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan reports from the U.S. Senate, Williams provides historical vignettes ranging from that of a hungry student who traded his pencil for bread to entire student bodies that adhered as closely to middle class American values of clothing and conduct as their circumstances allowed. As seen on page 169, adult freedpeople desired literacy for a variety of reasons: in preparation for their right to vote, the ability to independently study the Christian scriptures, to protect themselves from being cheated in business, and to simply satiate a deeply entrenched cultural value of literacy that many had inherited while enslaved. Whatever their motivations and level of material comforts, African-American pupils taught their instructors, some of whom harbored benign but misguided racial views, valuable lessons in the ability of black people to learn and in the capacity of adults to acquire literacy.

In her introduction, Williams poses the question: What did ordinary African Americans in the South do to provide education for themselves during slavery and when slavery ended? The answer is: whatever it took. By tapping the rich historical experience of African Americans, Heather Andrea Williams presents readers with the important personal exercise of autonomy and rejuvenating dignity that was gained by black Americans who worked within their communities to establish or demand educational institutions in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

David Lucander is a Ph.D. candidate in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

