THE INCORPORATION AND ABJECTION OF OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

Benjamin Kelsey Kearl
Arizona State University

In this essay I analyze two theoretical perspectives—incorporation and abjection—that inform official knowledge generally and high school American history textbooks specifically. While contemporary textbooks increasingly depict the experiences of historically marginalized groups such as women, African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, and the poor, they continue to incorporate these groups through the restrictive practice of mentioning, which limits possible resistant teachings and/or readings of American history. In addition to discussing the limiting function of incorporation, I also argue that textbooks abject knowledge deemed unfit for the curricular body of official knowledge and the selective tradition of American history. The psychoanalytic theory of abjection is the other side of incorporation and the contribution this essay makes to existent scholarship on official knowledge and textbooks.

SELECTIVE INCORPORATION AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF TEXTBOOK KNOWLEDGE

There are two general trajectories of textbook inquiry.[1] The first investigates the pedagogical functions of textbooks, while the second investigates their symbolic functions. The sociology of textbook knowledge falls within this latter trajectory and can further be divided into theories of reproduction and resistance. Reproduction theories are aligned with theories of cultural hegemony and argue that textbooks reproduce dominant ideologies through what Raymond Williams called the "selective tradition."[2] Applying Williams' theory of cultural hegemony, Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith have described textbooks as "particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting and organizing that vast universe of possible knowledge."[3] Which meanings and practices culture emphasizes and correspondingly rewards constitute the workings of cultural hegemony. Apple has noted that these workings are not abstractly imposed but saturate

[1] Sandra L. Wong, "School Textbooks and Cultural Authority," in *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*, ed. David L. Levinson, Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Alan R. Sadovnik (New York: Routledge, 2002), 533-537.
[2] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 82 (1973): 9. Williams defined the selective tradition as "that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as 'the tradition,' '*the* significant past.'"
[3] Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith, "The Politics of the Textbook," in *The Politics of the Textbook*, ed. Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

educational institutions even when hidden curricula do not make these workings immediately visible.[4]

According to Apple, schooling reproduces a particular type of knowledge—high status knowledge or that technical knowledge which conforms to the logic of corporate economies.[5] High status knowledge must necessarily remain scarce for the same reason that not everyone can be employed under capitalism—if everyone were employed, employment would lose its value. The same logic that governs financial capital also governs high status knowledge or cultural capital; for both, value is associated with reproduction, not distribution. Consequences of privileging high status knowledge include stratifying knowledge, privileging knowledge that is macro-economically beneficial, and categorizing students based on how well they reproduce high status knowledge. Though mutually reinforcing, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between schooling and economic structures. High status knowledge thus *limits* rather than *determines* official knowledge.

Textbooks reproduce high status knowledge through both textbook production and knowledge selection. Textbook adoption can occur at the local, county, or state level as with California, Texas, and Florida. These large adoption states, or "closed territories," impact the curriculum of the entire country because once a textbook series is adopted, public school districts can only purchase textbooks from a state-approved list. Textbook publishers are thus incentivized to mass-produce textbooks that meet the standards of large adoption states rather than produce locally or regionally variant textbooks, because educational bureaucracies guarantee textbook sales.[6]

Textbooks also reproduce high status knowledge through the selective tradition by reprinting similar passages in different textbook titles and editions and by obfuscating how textbook knowledge was selected. Through concealing the economic, social, and political negotiations that created official knowledge, the selective tradition makes official knowledge appear as *the* knowledge and as culture *tout court*. The selective tradition further legitimates itself by reproducing official knowledge amongst all aspect of culture so that it constitutes a culture's total ideology. Equally influential to understanding how cultural hegemony encompasses all facets of lived experience is Pierre Bourdieu's articulation of *habitus* or those "structuring structures" that can be "objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without any way of being the product of obedience to rules" and which are "collectively orchestrated without being the

[4] Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 3rd. ed. (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).
[5] Ibid.
[6] Michael W. Apple, "The Culture and Commerce of the Textbook," in *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities*, ed. Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 157-176.

product of the orchestrating action of the conductor."[7] An important aspect of *habitus* related to how textbooks incorporate historical events is Bourdieu's development of *doxa*.[8]

Textbooks describe American history as a series of definable historical events without analyzing the moments of crisis that either preceded or followed these events. Textbooks avoid discussing moments of crisis because such moments expose the arbitrariness of American history's cultural logic or its *doxa*. In moments of stasis, reasons why practices are practiced as such appear self-evident. Moments of crisis, however, introduce *heterodoxy*, which reveal the arbitrariness of the *doxa*. In such moments, rules or *orthodoxy* must be imposed to (re)establish cultural equilibrium. The result of this cultural intervention is that prohibitions replace the unspoken, self-evident *doxa*. What is ultimately at stake in the process of (re)establishing cultural equilibrium is which ideology will capture unique access to the field of *doxa* and thus be able to define culture. Textbook controversies are proxies for larger political and social antagonisms, which seek to define the *doxa* of American history and (re)establish cultural equilibrium around particular orderings of knowledge and thus resolve epistemological uncertainty through the imposition of curricular *orthodoxy*. The Rugg textbook controversy illustrates this process: The textbooks that stirred so much public ire in the 1930s were not *initially* opposed; it was only as America sought to expand commercially that the textbooks, which opponents argued included anti-consumerists messages, became controversial.[9]

In contrast to theories of reproduction, theories of resistance argue that while textbooks may legitimate the selective tradition, the process of knowledge legitimation is always open to negotiation and resistance. Recurrent textbook controversies provide evidence that textbook content is a contested terrain, a terrain that has been traced back to the 1960s.[10] Post-sixties textbooks included previously absent images and references to women, African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, and the poor. Though progressive, incorporation of these previously marginalized groups reflected a process of mentioning or the integration of "selective elements into the dominant tradition by bringing them into close association with the values of powerful groups."[11] Mentioning limits how and what knowledge is incorporated into the selective

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.
[8] Ibid., 164-171.
[9] Joel H. Spring, *Educating the Consumer-Citizen: A History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising, and Media* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), 131-135.
[10] Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 97. "Only in the nineteen-sixties did the textbooks finally end their rear guard action on behalf of a Northern European America."
[11] Apple and Christian-Smith, "The Politics of the Textbook," 10.

tradition. James Banks' content analysis of 1960s textbooks demonstrated the limiting function of mentioning. Banks argued that textbooks devoted more content to African American achievements in "literature, music, arts, science, industry, sports, entertainment, education and in other fields" than to events related to race relations and focused on heroic individuals rather than "the larger social and historical forces which have kept the black man at the lower rungs of the social ladder."[12]

Incorporation of the selective tradition of American history is only one way that textbooks constitute the curricular body of official knowledge. In the following two sections I discuss how the process of abjection also constitutes official knowledge. In the first section, I discuss the theories of structures of feeling and ideological quilting as a way of bridging the functionalities of incorporation and abjection. In the second section, I outline the theory of abjection and suggest how it might aid in textbook teachings and/or readings. Each of these sections involves a different constituting question. For the section on structures of feeling and ideological quilting the epistemic question asked is: "Who am 'I'?" For the section on abjection the epistemic question asked is: "Where am 'I'?" The use of "I" in these two sections is a reference to both the psychic ego and the Self of American history. The textual Self of American history having been constituted by incorporation and quilted together by structures of feeling, there remains something that cannot be incorporated into the curricular body of official knowledge. It is because this remainder is necessarily outside the curricular body of official knowledge that the second section asks a locating question.

STRUCTURES OF FEELING: WHO AM "I"?

Similar to Bourdieu's discussion of *habitus*, Williams' theory of structures of feeling posits a "structuring structure" that holds the field of cultural production together. Where the two theories differ is that structures of feeling provide intersubjective reasons why, for example, racist, classist, sexist, and hetero-sexist textbook passages are continually reproduced. Once selected knowledge is incorporated into the curricular body of official knowledge, it begins to psychologically resonate with teachers and students requiring not only an understanding of the cognitive functionalities of incorporation, but also the emotive and intersubjective workings of feelings, which Williams argued are "affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought."[13]

Structures of feeling bridge language (textbooks) and embodiment (teachings and/or readings) while also describing "the ways ideologies reflect

[12] James A. Banks, "A Content Analysis of the Black American in Textbooks," *Social Education* 33, no. 8 (1969): 963.
[13] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

emotional investments that remain unexamined during our interactions, because they have been woven into what is considered common sense."[14] To be sure, Apple has already noted the latter half of this assessment—the way ideologies disappear behind the common sense of everyday life.[15] What structures of feeling add to discussions of ideology are the emotional investments or feelings we lend to ideologies, the participatory role we play in maintaining ideologies among and across generations. The affective nature of structures of feeling also bridges the sociology of textbook knowledge and the psychoanalytic theory of abjection, a bridge that traverses another psychoanalytic concept, ideological quilting.

Ideological quilting is a retrospective process in which "the free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed . . . by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning."[16] Ideological quilting and structures of feeling work because of the support we lend ideology through identification. Slavoj Žižek gives the example of an iconic Marlboro cigarette advertisement to illustrate this process. In order for the infamous advertisement featuring a cowboy and the American prairie to have any quilting effect, Americans must come to identify themselves with the image of America being connoted in the advertisement. Ideological quilting thus occurs when "America itself is experienced as 'Marlboro country.'"[17] A second feature of ideological quilting is what Žižek describes as *Che vuoi?* This question, taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis, translates as "What do others want from me?" The answer to this questions is never the object itself (cigarette) or even the potential metonymic expressiveness that might stand in for the object (America); but rather, "the lost object is ultimately the subject itself, the subject as an object; which means that the question of desire, its original enigma is not primarily 'What do I want?' but 'What do others want from me?'"[18]

In answering this question, it is possible to see the cumulative effects of ideology. That is, we begin to recognize, if not expect, particular ideological formations and historical renderings. By participating in and with ideology we answer *Che vuoi?* This answer helps explain why racist, classist, sexist, and hetero-sexist textbook passages are continually reproduced. Ultimately, we accept these ideological formations and historical renderings because they predictably tell us who we are. This acceptance continues even once we have identified these formations and renderings.[19] Identification, as with

---

[14] Michalinos Zembylas, "'Structures of Feeling' in Curriculum and Teaching: Theorizing the Emotional Rules," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2002): 194.
[15] See note 4 above.
[16] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 87.
[17] Ibid., 96.
[18] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), 64.
[19] James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 2007), for example, has identified the

incorporation, however, is never complete, which is why both are contingent and require emotional investment.

Carol Mason's study of the 1974 Kanawha County textbook controversy illustrates how in lending ideologies signification, feelings quilt ideologies.[20] The controversy began when school board member Alice Moore objected to adoption of a new multiethnic language arts curriculum. At stake for Moore, according to Mason, were the eternal souls of West Virginian (white) children, which protesters equated to the soul of the nation. In each instance, the inviolable essence of the soul was racialized as white and in need of protection from the influences of multiethnic education. The controversy would result in a dramatic and profound realignment of Appalachian and American politics toward a conservative spiritual politics of whiteness. Political realignment involved union and working-class families associating with middle-class entrepreneurs, factory owners, and white supremacists along the axis of racial identity, an association predicated on a shared conflation of the personal and national soul.

Deriving a common (white) soul meant inverting understood notions of labor as soulful work immune from the exploitative practices of capitalism and repositioning the soul as derivative of capitalism. According to this latter formulation, the soul is no longer a historical concept defined by labor, but an "internal power" commodified by capitalism.[21] This inversion of labor allowed protesters to simultaneously dominate the textbook controversy and appear as its victims. Whereas previous notions of the soul *qua* labor held out an emancipatory possibility of escaping the historical yoke of capitalism, repositioning the soul as an internal power put an "apocalyptic emphasis on the future, projecting white people forward into a post-white world only to send them back to the future of avoiding the demise."[22]

The above tense of action is important to understanding both identification and ideological quilting. As a testament of historical resistance, the soul occupied a liminal non-place in which people were exploited, but remained ever hopeful of overcoming their exploitation. As an internal power, however, the soul occupied a vague biblical future in which West Virginians' alienated labor became an alienated future threatened by multiethnic education. Throughout the controversy, the inviolable essence of the soul was a signifier

---

"lies" American history textbooks tell without discussing how these "lies" are received by teachers and students. Thus, while Loewen's work is helpful in correcting the historical record, it avoids asking why the particular historical formations and ideological renderings he *identified* continue to be reproduced.

[20] Carol Mason, "Miscegenation and Purity: Reproducing the Souls of White Folk," *Hypatia* 22, no. 2 (2007), 98-121.

[21] Ibid., 108-109.

[22] Ibid., 109.

for race and quilted the identity of Kanawha County residents and the nation. According to Mason:

> Rather than invoking issues of race, textbook protestors evoked spirituality. Expressing concerns over "our" children's "eternal souls" was an evocation of spirituality that made their protest of multiracial curriculum not seem overtly political or racial, but only natural—as natural as a parent's love.[23]

ABJECTION: WHERE AM "I"?

While quilted identification is stable, but because identification is constituted by allowing external signifiers inside the psychic ego—inside the "I" of American history—there is always the possibility that these signifiers will become abject knowledge which must be expelled from the curricular body of official knowledge. This contingency most often results in abjecting what is foreign or Other. Julia Kristeva has discussed our relation to the Other through exploring the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the *unheimlich* or the uncanny, which is simultaneously familiar and strange, familiar in its strangeness and strange in its familiarity. Encounters with the Other are uncanny because they are also encounters with ourselves. As Kristeva has argued, "the foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners."[24] If the Other is not foreign, then why does encountering the foreigner cause anxiety? According to Kristeva:

> The other leaves us separate, incoherent; even more so, he can make us feel that we are not in touch with our own feelings, that we reject them or, on the contrary, that we refuse to judge them—we feel "stupid," we have "been had."[25]

Left unexamined, these feelings can manifest themselves negatively as we make the foreign(er) account for the feelings *they make us feel*. The psychoanalytic theory of abjection asks us to recognize that these feelings are present not because of what is strange and external, but because of what is familiar and internal. Foundational to understanding abjection is the primal struggle for individuation, which Kristeva maintains happens prior to the Lacanian mirror stage. In traditional Lacanian readings of individuation, the inside/outside boundary of the Self is formed when the subject (the infant) sees themselves—or rather their reflection (*imago*)—in a mirror. By identifying with the *imago* the psychic ego, the "I" is established.

---

[23] Ibid., 114.
[24] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 192.
[25] Ibid., 187.

For Kristeva, individuation occurs through the infant struggling to separate themselves from the mother while still in the pre-symbolic stage of infant development. Central to this struggle is a spatial ambiguity between the border of the Self and the mother. This spatial ambiguity results in an undifferentiated self in which the infant is both part of (inside) and not part of (outside) the mother's body. Abjection is the infant's attempt to deal with the instability of this porous inside/outside border. In the process of self-differentiation, what is abjected is what is not part of the clean and proper self. Kristeva has described this process through the metaphor of food loathing:

> "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself,* I spit *myself out,* I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.[26]

Because part of oneself is abjected in the struggle for individuation, not only is the process never complete, as "I" am always implicated in it, but what is abjected is never completely banished from our consciousness. Rather, the abject remains a location of trauma, a seam in the ideological quilt that we revisit because of its ability to simultaneously repel and attract us. The push/pull of abjection thus both threatens and maintains the borders of the Self. The Self is threatened because "the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self," and is maintained because "the fear of such collapse keeps the subject vigilant."[27] Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen have referred to the abject as something simultaneously reviled and desired, which, they argue, explains why adults both denounce and (mis)appropriate youthful enjoyment.[28] Elsewhere, in discussing how girls learn to treat their bodies, Kenway and Bullen have argued that the abject "provokes the desire to expel the unclean, to restore the boundaries upon which the Self or subject depend. . . in so far as the abject challenges notions of identity and the social order it 'must' be cast out."[29] But because what is cast out bears an uncanny resemblance to the Self, the process of abjection is unbounded.

---

[26] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
[27] Noelle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.
[28] Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen, *Consuming Children: Education—Entertainment—Advertising* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), 86.
[29] Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen, "Consuming Skin: Dermographies of Female Subjection and Abjection," in *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption: Living and Learning in the Shadow of the "Shopocalypse*," ed. Jennifer A. Sandlin and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 2010), 163.

Kristeva has expressed the unboundness of abjection through the metaphor of the corpse (cadaver). In seeing the corpse, "I" am beside myself. "I" fall (*cadere*) into death. This uncanny experience carries with it a feeling of horror of being cut off from the Symbolic Order where "I" am a desiring subject and returned to the *chora* of undifferentiation. The resulting anxiety reorients the question "Who am 'I'?" to "Where am 'I'?" as the Self strives to locate and establish self-defining borders, which limit where "I" can encounter the Other. Kristeva explains:

> [T]he corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into "my" world. Deprived of world, therefore, *I fall in a faint*.[30]

From an ethical perspective, jan jagodzinski has argued that the abject presents a possibility for an ecological ethic of care in which we are accountable for both our psychical and physical excrement and responsible for, not liable to, the Other. Because the abject exists in extimate space—as both revulsion and attraction—it is able to illuminate the hypocritical way "the Law can hide the terror it wreaks in the name of 'the people'; that is to say, the way the Symbolic Order expels its abject to keep its 'pure' identity."[31] In relation to the sociology of textbook knowledge, the Law is analogous to the selective tradition and functions in much the same way—to obfuscate its own internal workings. In presenting official knowledge as *the* knowledge and as culture *tout court* the violence that incorporation wreaks to continually legitimate itself is concealed. This also means that once knowledge is rendered abject, it must be expelled from the body of official knowledge because it threatens to expose the illegitimacy of the Symbolic Order, to expose that its identity is contingent and not pure.

High school American history textbooks are abject curricular matter because they are both part of and not part of our national- and self-identity. In addition to being proxies for larger political and social antagonisms, textbooks are also proxies for individuation. Critics that argue textbooks either do not include enough or include too much knowledge are also saying: "I" am not enough; "I" am too much. This understanding of textbooks as abject highlights how abjection "contradicts the self's (national and individual) claim to unity

[30] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.
[31] jan jagodzinski, "A Strange Introduction: My Apple Thing," in *Pedagogical Desire: Authority, Seduction, Transference, and the Question of Ethics*, ed. jan jagodzinski (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), xxxix.

and knowledge."[32] How might the theory of abjection inform textbook teachings and/or readings? Within textbook passages, it is possible to discern the thin film of a narrative web, which Kristeva has argued is constantly threatening to cry-out:

> For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first. . . . The narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* that, when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror.[33]

Abjection points to a possible explanation of why history curricula and textbooks dedicate so much space to discussing, for example, the terrible history of slavery. All narratives through their selection of particular signifiers strive to create a unity, a total whole. Narratives are never complete, however, because their borders are always porous, allowing for subject/object and inside/outside to mix. As narrative totality begins to burst, it cries out, cries which are rearticulated as moments of suffering-horror, which reintroduce narrative unity. It is for this reason that history curricula can *safely* discuss slavery—its suffering-horrors forms a curricular unity. In discussing slavery, we abject our historical selves, and provided these abjected selves never encounter our present selves, temporal borders are established allowing slavery to become a safe, unifying object of historical inquiry.

The recurrent incorporation of the terrible history of slavery as a unifying curricular suffering horror also elucidates how official knowledge accommodates moments of crisis. As a suffering horror, slavery remains located in the past, removed from present instances of racism. On the other hand, textbook controversies reveal how official knowledge continually abjects questions of race and racism. Even when aligned more with economic questions, as with the Rugg textbook controversy, questions of race still loom, as with the Kanawha County textbook controversy. Banks suggested this process in noting how 1960s textbooks used African American achievements as metonyms for racial equality. Contemporary textbooks continue to advance claims of racial equality, most often by incorporating Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement to connote racial progress. Abjection, on the other hand, continues to define not only the curricular borders of official knowledge, but also where the Self of American history is epistemically located: "I" am where the Other (the abject) is not.

---

[32] Norma Claire Moruzzi, "National Abjects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-Identification," in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 144.
[33] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 141.

Whereas incorporation allows selected outside signifiers into the curricular body of official knowledge, abjection expels knowledge to establish curricular borders around the Self of American history. Recent attempts by the Texas Board of Education to expel Thurgood Marshall and César Chávez from the state's social studies standards illustrates how official knowledge desires to remain separate from what it renders as abject knowledge. Finally, abjection impacts how students experience schooling. Analogous to how official knowledge selects and abjects knowledge, schooling selects and abjects student bodies by incorporating select student bodies into schooling and expelling abject student bodies. Textbooks are thus more than entombments of official knowledge, they are also particular ways of selecting and *abjecting* that vast possible universe of student bodies.