

**Composing Progress in the United States: Race Science, Social Justice, and the Rhetorics of  
Writing Assessment, 1845-1859**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

For Alex Olmsted – You are the future still.

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## **ABSTRACT**

While a growing literature explores the indebtedness of educational testing initiatives in the United States to so-called “race sciences” like eugenics, the role of race science in the history of writing assessment remains underexplored. Indeed, few histories of writing assessment even explicitly discuss race, racism, or social justice. Complicating existing portraits of the assessment past, this archival study reveals how beliefs about racial progress and justice complexly shaped the emergence of writing assessment in the antebellum United States. Writing assessment developed in response to anxieties about population and beliefs that writing could be employed to monitor and manage it, commonplaces promulgated by a then-popular science of race and mental measurement: phrenology. Though we often associate phrenology with examinations of the skull, not the page, leading phrenologists held that social environments like the writing classroom could exercise and expand the mind in ways that improved future generations. Among phrenology’s greatest American champions was Horace Mann, perhaps the country’s premier education reformer, who proposed that improvements in instruction and assessment could constitutionally revise the human body, augmenting mental capacity, eliminating physical disability, and protecting the racial body against decline. Between 1845 and 1859, he helped sponsor a series of writing assessment innovations, each regarded as a social justice intervention that furthered racial progress: written examination and score reporting to advance accountability, data disaggregation by racial group to advocate for fairness, written entrance examination to

regulate college inclusion and inclusivity, and co-educational classroom writing assessment to inculcate virtue. Behind each innovation was a phrenological belief that writing externalized the mind's capacities, such that appraisals of writing could be rhetorically repurposed to make claims about the student body's racial worth. Working with colleagues on Boston's School Examining Committees in 1845, Mann promoted and publicized the country's first city-wide written examinations, intended to hold educators accountable for pedagogical failures that jeopardized their students' evolutionary development. As part of this effort, Mann and his colleagues introduced new multimodal methods for reporting assessment results, visually representing the student body as a tabular body of errors. Comparing writing assessment data from Boston's segregated white and black schools, Mann and his colleagues exposed racialized score gaps and advocated for increased racial fairness in education. Even so, their understandings of "fairness" reinforced racist narratives about black inferiority and left segregated schooling in place. Founding Antioch College in 1853, Mann mandated entrance examinations in English-language writing to police the gates of his new co-educational, racially integrated campus. This meritocratic standard for inclusion, however, was nested with phrenological assumptions about human worth. Finally, Antioch's classrooms framed written composition in moral terms and introduced co-educational peer assessment to structure virtuous interactions between the sexes. In doing so, the writing classroom furthered one of Mann's core goals for co-education: increasing students' sexual criticality and restraint, virtues believed necessary for controlling population quality and quantity. Recovering these scenes enriches our understanding of writing education history by revealing how race science was fundamental to the emergence of writing assessment, and by clarifying how ostensibly "just" efforts to support student development can be vectors for eugenic assumptions, aims, and claims regarding the body's value.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction:

#### Assessing Writing to Save the World:

#### A New Beginning for Writing Assessment History

Writing education has never just been about writing. Its attention to textual bodies has always shaped, and been shaped by, an attention to bodies of other kinds: forming and reforming student writers by informing how they write. For Writing Studies scholars to more fully understand the historical aims of the writing classroom, it is necessary first to reckon with the broader social aims at work in *writing assessment*: the means by which student bodies are read and regulated through bodies of writing. Through assessment, the cultural anxieties and ambitions of writing education take on material reality and institutional force: Assessment polices educational access, advancement, and attainment, composing the inner world of the classroom by defining who and what is valued within it. Crucially, the aims advanced by writing assessment are also claims—claims about who students should be, about what it means to develop *as writers* or *through writing*, and about why “good” writings and writers matter to society. To assess writing is to relay messages about the quality or qualities of bodies; this is assessment’s greatest rhetorical promise and its gravest peril. Returning to the antebellum emergence of writing assessment in the United States, this dissertation provides the discipline of Writing Studies an historical examination of how student bodies came to be marked in the classroom through their writings. The story of writing assessment is, I show, also the story of



eugenic efforts to compose racial progress: Assessment efforts to monitor and manage written composition emerged as a means of monitoring and managing social composition. This kind of engagement with the past is intended to support writing educators in their engagements with students in the present day, providing a critical, multi-part case study for thinking through how attempts to help students can themselves be sources of harm. Violences in the classroom can take many forms, but the most insidious of these are perhaps injustices cloaked in kindly promises of improvement.

By intervening in Writing Studies' disciplinary memory for writing assessment, I seek to reframe the ways writing educators think of the stakes and significance of assessment—and of writing education generally.<sup>1</sup> The way we tell history matters, Robert Connors tells us, because it supplies writing scholars and educators with a unifying “communality,” providing educators with a shared sense of disciplinary past and purpose (*Composition-Rhetoric* 19). To introduce a new sense of this past is to create new conditions for disciplinary self-examination. In Connors' words, “We need the communality provided by historical knowledge because of both the peculiarly troubled nature and the unequalled moral power of composition studies as a college discipline. We use our knowledge in unique ways in studying and teaching composition, and we have always thought our mission was nothing less than to *save the world*” (19, emphasis mine). Of course, college composition instructors are not the only writing educators who partake in the mission to “save the world,” so to speak: If teachers of writing at any grade level believe their work has social value, it stands to reason that—if only implicitly—they also believe that the writing classroom supports the student body's improvement and, in so doing, makes the world a better place.<sup>2</sup> The assumptions brought to this moral mission shape the ways it values—and devalues—the student body. Writing Studies needs histories attentive to the bodies privileged in

the composition classroom, because these histories can help open new spaces for the discipline to examine the complex, even contradictory relationships of writing education to social (in)justice.

Writing assessment supplies the social machinery for this process of appraising bodies. And as I argue, this machinery is not only profoundly consequential for the student body, it also rhetorically powers and participates in broader cultural projects to purify and improve the social body. In the pages to follow, I show that writing assessment enters the story of education in the United States in response to cultural anxieties about the racial health and quality of the national population. Techniques for appraising student writing were licensed by an interest in reading and shaping students *through* their writings. At scale, assessing writing was imagined as a means to monitor and manage populations, ministering to their defects and administrating over the course of their development. I show, too, that these assessments of the student body relied on and reinforced eugenic assumptions about the worth of particular kinds of student bodies—marking some as deficient and others as desirable on the basis of their written performances. The lessons to be learned from this past are no less relevant today than they were in antebellum America: Of any effort to compose progress in the writing classroom, we must ask who or what is left behind.

Though I write this history primarily for a Writing Studies audience, I do so mindful of the fact that writing assessment is a multidisciplinary field, claimed variously by language educators, linguists, educational measurement scholars, among others (see Huot; Poe, “Consequences”). For this reason, I address my comments throughout this dissertation less to Writing Studies as a discipline than to the more inclusive “field of writing assessment,” which I take to be the intellectual terrain where the various traditions engaged in theorizing and practicing writing assessment meet. The past recovered in this dissertation contributes to Writing Studies scholarship—and to scholarship in the multidisciplinary field of writing assessment, in

which Writing Studies plays a central role—by providing those who theorize and practice writing assessment a new sense of history to unify around, inviting new and challenging questions about the ways we seek to sponsor student progress through assessment. Such a backward-looking task is a timely way for us to look forward. The field of writing assessment is in the process of explicitly reckoning with its role in the moral mission of writing education, with a growing chorus of Writing Studies scholars working toward an antiracist future for writing assessment: coming to terms with the field’s participation in racist inequalities and revising its practices to promote more socially just ends.

If we are serious about advancing an antiracist future for writing assessment, one important part of this effort must be acknowledging and engaging with the field’s racist *past*. To the extent that, as Connors suggests, the histories we write provide frameworks for communalizing and agenda-setting, what we choose to center (or leave out) in our histories is of the utmost importance for the field. At least until recently, Writing Studies has tended to discuss writing assessment and its pasts in a social vacuum of sorts, narrating the history of assessment as a series of technical shifts in how to appraise or respond to student writing. Sensitivity to the social meanings and consequences of assessment has been in short supply in these histories—and explicit talk of race, racism, and racial justice has been all but totally absent in them. Rejecting this state of affairs, my dissertation locates race and social justice as central preoccupations to the field from its earliest days, offering a new beginning for writing assessment history. This beginning resets the field’s agenda and builds community around an explicit, critical attention to the moral aims of assessment.

The pursuit of social justice is, according to Iris Marion Young, centrally an anti-oppressive project: “where social group differences exist and some groups are privileged while

others are oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in order to undermine oppression” (3). As I understand it in this dissertation, social justice is a variant of the more general project to promote progress: an effort to secure social improvement by intervening in social organization, making it less violent and more equitable. Assessment matters to social justice because it is through assessment that student bodies are marked—judged, sorted, selected, or excluded. To shift the Writing Studies scene so that it is more centrally attentive to the social justice stakes of assessment, we need to focus our critical attention not merely on how to *do* assessment, but on the investigation of what assessment is even *for*. As I will show, investigating assessment in this manner is another, more concrete way to ask difficult questions about what writing and writing education are *for*—about the moral mission that constellates and coordinates the writing classroom. We need new questions, not just better ones, and we need histories that sponsor and sustain community around them. Investigating how well an assessment works—or whether it is “reliable” or “valid”—only takes on meaning after we take up more fundamental questions about meaning. Quite simply, no assessment of writing takes place outside of beliefs about student bodies and aims for intervening in them for the better. To understand what assessment means, it is necessary to first understand how it frames and makes claims about students—and about different student subpopulations. If writing education pivots on the axis of saving the world in some way, the new beginning this dissertation offers to the field comes in the form of a new guiding question it advances: *What world are we trying to save through assessment?*

I have come to think of this question as one pertaining to *assessment-rhetoric*, a term I mint to designate the twin, layered claims made by assessment: overt claims about writing along with more covert claims about the moral meanings of writing.<sup>3</sup> “Assessment-rhetoric” is a

concept I define at greater length later in this introduction, and one that I explore in the chapters to follow. I use it in this dissertation to draw attention to a peculiar rhetorical aspect of “the power of naming and of forming that assessment wields” (Yancey, “Looking” 498). To engage in assessment-rhetoric is to advance assertions about bodies through assessment, naming and forming what those bodies mean, as well as what they are worth. Edward Schiappa tells us that to describe something, to give it a name or to classify it, is a subtle rhetorical act—suggesting, even when not asserting outright, what something *is*, how we ought to think or talk about it, and how we ought to imagine its underlying nature and meanings (113-29; see also Burke; Hammond, “Definitive”). As I understand it, assessment is the rhetorical art of inspection and entitlement: a rhetoric of definition. Put more schematically, assessment is rhetorical because it reads and it names, and in doing so, makes claims. Yet assessment’s claims never emerge in a vacuum. They spring from a set of values and purposes for writing education—from a moral infrastructure of aims and assumptions, which configures the writing classroom’s progress-oriented work. To consider “assessment-rhetoric,” then, is to consider the rhetorical work of assessment within the context of these aims and assumptions, examining *the claims assessment makes and the claims it makes possible about the value of bodies*.

My understanding of assessment’s underwriting moral infrastructure draws inspiration from Asao B. Inoue’s recent reframing of writing assessment. Inoue has persuasively argued for thinking of “assessment” as being irreducible to single artifacts and actions: assessment is, instead, “an ecology with explicit features, namely a quality of *more than*, interconnectedness among everything and everyone in the ecology, and an explicit racial politics that students must engage with” (*Antiracist* 9, emphasis in original). This “assessment ecology,” as he configures it, is made up of “power, parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places” (10). And when

thinking of the *purposes* of assessment, Inoue describes both practical classroom and institutional purposes (checking for understanding, ensuring consistency in instruction, providing and receiving feedback, etc.), and also what he calls the “larger purposes” of assessment (133-8), which I have been discussing as its underlying moral aims. Historical attention to assessment-rhetoric is an invitation to explore the interpretative ecology of assessment, with our appraisals of writing articulated *to* and *through* practical purposes and moral aims. The reorientation of the field that this dissertation works toward is one in which the imagined “larger” purposes of writing assessment—typically backgrounded in assessment historiography and scholarship, in favor of practical purposes—take center stage in the stories we tell about who we are, and what our agendas should be moving forward.

To this end, I uncover a new beginning for the field in the unlikeliest of places: its old beginning. In the pages to follow, we will travel to antebellum America with Horace Mann—arguably the most famous education reformer in the country’s history—as he advocates and oversees implementation of a series of landmark writing assessment innovations between 1845 and his death in 1859. The former date marks a moment that has been canonized in existing histories of assessment—and histories of educational assessment, generally—as an origin point. In 1845 Boston, the United States gained its first formal city-wide *written* examinations, advocated and overseen by Mann—serving, at that time, as Massachusetts’ first Secretary of Education, and working in conjunction with a team of reform-oriented Boston school examiners. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Reese; Witte, Trachsel, and Walters), generations of historians and assessment scholars have remarked on the emergence of written examination only to quickly move past it—pointing out, as they do so, how the 1845 examinations begin the slow eclipse of oral examination by writing, prized for its standardization and efficiency.<sup>4</sup> They might

also note, glancingly, that the examinations were politically-motivated achievement tests. These caveats aside, the 1845 examinations tend to be treated as a largely anodyne affair, sanitized of social meaning and cultural significance. Writing enters the story of assessment as a mode of testing, we are told—a technical innovation, flavored with technocratic political uses, and little more.

This thin historical account has the benefit of sitting comfortably within the stories we like to tell about the field’s history—stories about methods, scale, standardization, and efficiency—but has one significant drawback: it has little to say about the student body, and how assessment marks, constructs, and values it. When submitted to closer critical scrutiny, and read against the backdrop of Mann’s larger assessment-rhetorical reform project, the 1845 writing assessments tell a different story—a new story, animated by the pursuit of justice and fraught with fantasies of racial betterment, positioning us to tell new and different stories about the field’s historical priorities, its ongoing legacies, and our responsibilities in response to them. As it happens, Mann’s assessment *innovations* were intentional social justice *interventions*, each introduced in service of Mann’s ultimate moral mission: human improvement. Mann understood his education reform efforts as righting a grievous social wrong; he believed failures to appropriately cultivate the nation’s youth were disfiguring the social body and endangering its future. His aim was to compose progress in the United States by managing and monitoring composition in the classroom. In the interest of promoting social progress, Mann tasked assessment with advancing four social justice goals: promoting *accountability* for quality instruction, ensuring *fairness* for diverse student populations, regulating *inclusion* and increasing access, and promoting *virtue* by producing virtuous writers. These social justice topoi have currency within the field of writing assessment to this day, with each imagined as a “larger

purpose”—a moral mission—assessment might serve. In a real sense, then, Mann’s early advocacy for assessment-based reforms inaugurates the history of social justice advocacy within the field. Social justice assessment-rhetorics are as old as written examination itself.

At the same time, Mann constructed his ultimate aim of “improvement” in eugenic racial terms. Steeped in the race science of his day, Mann advanced writing assessment as a means of race betterment—of identifying human deficiencies and working to eradicate them. Social justice and race science, for Mann, were necessarily interdependent; to put the insights of race science into practice was to secure human improvement. And even as writing assessment propelled school reform and facilitated improved conditions in the writing classroom, these overt material movements in the direction of justice were accompanied by covert ideological movements in the direction of racist social stratification. Herein is the ecological complexity endemic to assessment-rhetoric: the claims assessments advance are multiple and overlapping, but do not always lead in the same direction. Any assessment that relies on racist assumptions and aims covertly reinforces and recirculates those aims, even when overtly sponsoring reforms we think desirable and socially just. Racism and social justice, in one—but how? The apparent contradiction at the heart of Mann’s assessment-rhetoric is easily explained: the ecology of assumptions and aims at work in his reform agenda *defined* for him what social justice meant, and what assessing in service of it entailed. They defined the world that needed saving and defined too how assessment could be of service to this world-saving moral enterprise.

So it is for us today. This is a history we need to recover, if we ever hope to recover from it.

As I type these words, writing scholars find themselves immersed in the work of identifying the racist effects of assessment, and are laboring to reframe writing assessment as a



tool for social justice. Racism and writing assessment. Social Justice and writing assessment. In Horace Mann's assessment innovations, we find a genealogy for both, along with a pressing critical reminder that "social justice" is every bit as rhetorically constructed, every bit as *human* as our assessments themselves. Each is underwritten by an ecology of assumptions and aims. The historical distance of the scenes explored in this dissertation might empower writing educators to look at familiar, comfortable assessment practices in unfamiliar, uncomfortable ways: If our assumptions and aims are imbricated with racist beliefs about difference and deviance, our loftiest efforts at social justice will retain traces of the injustices that nest in and inspire them. Rhetorically speaking, social justice is what we make it. We owe it to our students to re-examine our assessment-rhetorics, and to ensure that the "social justice" aims we endorse are deserving of that name.

Though each chapter of my dissertation seeks to explore a specific complexity nested in the assessment past, I want to state my general conclusion at the outset. I do not intend to argue that "progress" and "student improvement" are, themselves, ignoble or impossible goals—nor do I want to suggest that writing education's moral missions to "save the world" are inherently self-sabotaging. The story I am seeking to tell is nothing so tidy and totalizing as a rejection of writing education's underlying moral aims. Instead, I seek to show how the moral terrain of writing assessment can be messy—how our efforts to save the world can be fraught with ethical tendencies that pull in multiple directions.<sup>5</sup> Writing assessment (like writing education, generally) can be a space of moral "contradiction," in the sense discussed by Paulo Freire: the way "that human action can *move in several directions at once*, that something can contain itself and its opposite also" (Shor and Freire 69; see also George 90-1). When we attempt to help students move forward, that very action codifies what (or who) must be left behind. At a

minimum, this movement is never simple or neutral. And if the assessment innovations sponsored by Mann are any indication, the complex movements at work in our assessment-rhetorics may reinforce some social injustices even while attempting to intervene in the world for the better.

It is important to revisit Mann and antebellum assessment reforms not because they were uniformly villainous, but instead because he imagined them to be a source of immense social good. In at least this way, though separated from us today by more than a century and a half, Mann is very much our educational contemporary, sharing in the progressive cause that, at least implicitly, orients writing instruction to this day. In considering the moral contradictions at work in his best efforts, we might find ourselves better positioned to consider them in our own. The pursuit of progress is endemic to writing education—though we may know and call “progress” by another name, like “improvement,” “betterment,” “advancement,” or “development.”<sup>6</sup> Progress can name radical efforts to remake students in some new mold or can, more conservatively, be what we work toward when we aid students in growing in a direction believed to be natural and normal. What separates these efforts are the assumptions about what counts as progress, about what development means and what it means for students to be appropriately developed. In recognizing that progress is the *sine qua non* of the work of the writing classroom, it becomes more important—not less—to reckon with the fact that progressive projects are never innocent of assumptions about the bodies they seek to improve.

As writing educators, it may be difficult, even uncomfortable for us to think through the complexities of our assessment-rhetorics—those claims about bodies our assessments make and make possible. But this difficulty and discomfort is, I think, productive: We should never become so comfortable with reading students through their writings that we are unmoved by the

rhetorical stakes and significance of this work. And because the aim of composing progress in the writing classroom is unlikely to be abandoned anytime soon, a critical and historically grounded stance toward “progress” provides a powerful resource for realizing its promises while militating against its perils. For writing educators whose pursuit of progress takes the form of a pursuit of social justice through writing assessment, the antebellum scenes examined in this dissertation carry special importance. What they teach is this: Social justice is not an answer. It is a series of questions. For classroom instructors and writing program administrators alike, these assessment-rhetorical questions include ones about the following elements:

- *Constructs*: What kinds of written (or writerly) bodies are we intending to develop in the classroom—how and why?
- *Accountability*: What aspects of writing should “count” and who should be held responsible for them?
- *Fairness*: What does it mean to treat different student groups equitably with respect to their differences?
- *Inclusion*: What does it look like to appropriately regulate institutional access through writing assessment?
- *Virtue*: What kinds of writerly habits and relationships do we want assessment to support?

How we answer questions like these determines the world we are working to compose in the writing classroom. The time has come for us to begin asking these questions out loud.

The past can provide us models for this work—cases for thinking through how our assessment-rhetorics lead us in directions other than those we might have intended to go. The new beginning attempted here is intended to model one form this historiographic investigation might take. In the sections of this introduction to follow, I provide some background to orient readers in this project. I begin by discussing in greater detail the field of writing assessment’s existing engagements with the topics of race, racism, and history, before proceeding to a

discussion of Horace Mann and his assessment-related reforms, sketching some ways the new beginning offered by this dissertation helps to complement and complicate existing scholarship. This introduction concludes with an overview of the chapters to follow, describing how each subsequent chapter focuses on one of the assessment-rhetorical questions above: *constructs*, *accountability*, *fairness*, *inclusion*, and *virtue*.

The study of Mann and his sponsorship of writing assessment between 1845 and 1859 is certainly not the only place we could look to locate a genealogy for racism or justice in the field, but there is a unique critical affordance to finding a new beginning in the field's familiar origin story. Doing so underscores, painfully and powerfully, that the story of writing assessment has always been the story of race, racism, and social justice interventions—a story rich with details about the human consequences of the moral aims we endorse. The historian of writing assessment does not need to stray far from the field's familiar touchstones to reposition race and justice at the center of the field's past. They have been there all along. We have just chosen to write about other things. Different histories and futures for the field are possible—but we need, in the present, to begin writing them.

### **Assessment-Rhetorics: Arts for Appraising Bodies**

The focus of writing assessment is the body: bodies of writing and the bodies of writers. For this reason, assessments of writing are never far removed from beliefs about bodily difference, deviance, and development—never far, that is, from theories of population and of subpopulations, human kinds and hierarchies, the collective race and the races that compose it. Richer historical engagement with questions of race and racism promises to reconfigure the ways writing educators understand their assessment work—its meanings, consequences, and stakes.

Before proceeding to discussions of the field of writing assessment and the histories that populate it at present, it is necessary to define in greater detail what I mean by “assessment-rhetoric,” “race,” and “racism”—terms that are central to my analysis in the chapters to follow. In doing so, I pay particular attention to *eugenic race science* (or, as it might be better called, *eugenic racism*) and its integrative conception of human difference and hierarchy, which treats class, disability, and reproductive fitness as indices of racial health. Assessment-rhetoric is the focus of this section, leading directly into a deeper discussion of racial formation and eugenic race science in the next. As I will show in the chapters to follow, the phrenological race science endorsed by Mann was an early expression of eugenic thinking in American education—and writing assessment provided both a persuasive machinery for advancing claims about desirable and undesirable forms of American life, and an imagined rhetorical means for intervening in and improving student bodies.<sup>7</sup>

Mann’s attempts to eugenically intervene in racial health through writing education provides us a complex case study for thinking through something more general: Race and racism are, themselves, fundamentally *rhetorical products of assessment*—powered by judgments about being and belonging, power and potential. Writing assessment has historically participated in what Jay Dolmage calls the “rhetorical construction” of bodies, and of race and disability, specifically: “A rhetorical perspective suggests that ... spaces and discourses must be understood as formed by bodies and as, in part, *forming* bodies” (*Disabled* 13, emphasis in original). That is to say, physical and discursive environments shape what bodies are taken to mean, circumscribing where and how they can move, and providing a vocabulary for describing their qualities and quality. In writing assessment, we find one education-specific site for enacting what Young calls the unjust “scaling of bodies”—“weighing, measuring, and classifying them

according to a normative hierarchy” that positions some groups as desirable and others as degenerate (128). There is a need, then, to develop a critical vocabulary for examining how assessments rhetorically participate in the formation and scaling of bodies—work that, for Horace Mann and his collaborators, included forming and reforming races, funding racial hierarchies, and fueling fantasies of racial progress.

To bear some of the weight of this need, I propose the term *assessment-rhetoric*: the strategic use of assessment instruments and practices to advance claims about who students are, what their writings say about them, and how they should be acted on as a result. The “should,” here, is key: Meaningfully examining assessment-rhetorics requires meaningfully examining the moral missions assessment is imagined to participate in. It requires examining what assessment is *for*—what it means, relative to our guiding aims. These aims guide and find expression in the ways that assessment reads and responds to bodies. What I call “assessment-rhetoric” is the interpretative process of identifying bodies of writing with the bodies of writers, marking texts as a means of remarking on their authors—their quality, qualities, and areas for improvement. In doing so, assessment-rhetoric *rewrites* student bodies, shaping how they are socially legible and circumscribing how they move in-and-between society.

My thinking about “assessment-rhetoric” is indebted to the existing ways that Writing Studies scholars have discussed the rhetoric of assessment, which tend to explore how assessment is enmeshed in a rhetorical situation of some kind (see, e.g., Harrington; Huot; Inoue, “Teaching”; K. Miller; Yancey, “Looking”).<sup>8</sup> Brian Huot explains “that writing assessment is inherently rhetorical, since what we are trying to do is to create a document that makes a specific point about writing and its learning to effect some kind of action” (181). In Susanmarie Harrington’s words, “Assessments, like all texts, have audiences, purposes, and settings,”

providing writing program administrators with “one vehicle for communicating about your program, internally or externally” (199). In this kind of spirit, scholars have proposed that treating assessment as rhetorical involves careful attention to communication on the part of those undertaking assessment. For instance:

- To teach his students “the rhetoric of assessment,” Inoue provides them opportunities for peer assessment and for reflecting on the communicative choices involved in any “assessment rhetoric”—dwelling “on *how* the rhetoric of assessment makes the judgments it does” (“Teaching” 50, emphasis in original);
- Patricia Lambert Stock professes “that descriptions of students’ writing competencies must be especially shaped for the particular audience who have a vested interest in those students and their writing” (102); and
- Huot champions rhetorical sensitivity to audience when instructors write responses to their students’ writings, asking assessors to ask themselves: “who is the student and where is she in the act of becoming a writer?” (131).

What I mean by assessment-rhetoric includes but extends beyond attention to how assessments communicate and are communicated; assessment-rhetoric also strategically links claims made about student writing to broader social projects and moral aims in which “writing” is imagined to play an important role. My understanding of assessment as a strategic rhetoric brings the work of assessment scholars like Huot into productive conversation with the theory of rhetoric advocated by Dolmage, who frames rhetoric as “*the circulation of power through communication*”—that is, communication that is both “social” and “strategic,” structuring and participating in “larger patterns and plans that orchestrate possibilities” (*Disabled 2*, emphasis in original). To talk of assessment as “rhetorical” in this sense, then, is to draw attention to the ways that assessment shapes and circumscribes human possibilities: Assessment regulates institutional mobility, identity, and legibility, sending a message about who counts, how, and why. Assessments of writing, specifically, can be freighted with unspoken claims about why writing *matters to the world*—and about how, through writing, students come to *matter in the world*.<sup>9</sup>

Just beneath the surface of the overt claims we make about student writing is a submerged set of assertions about the moral purposes and progressive possibilities of writing education—that is, claims about the nature and abilities of the student body and the potential for writing pedagogy to intervene in that body for the better. Huot’s questions for assessors above provide a productive springboard for thinking through the additional dimensions I will be using the term assessment-rhetoric to explore (see also Inoue, *Antiracist* 16-21). Because no student exists—or is assessed—outside her historical context, asking ourselves questions like “Who is the student?” or “Where is she in the act of becoming a writer?” requires us to ask ourselves more fundamental questions: What are our assumptions about that student’s background and how that background has shaped her? What do we think it means to be “a writer” or to have “writing ability”? What is our working theory of student “becoming,” development, or progress? In asking questions like this, we begin to move beyond thinking about the rhetoric of writing assessment in abstract, acontextual terms, to thinking instead about concrete, contextual, historical assessment-rhetorics: How the assumptions and aims we bring to assessment orchestrate the possibilities of writing education, judging and forming student bodies in accordance with our beliefs about what progress looks like in the composition classroom.

Such questions are necessary, in part, because writerly identities are always situated and embodied. In Inoue’s words, “We speak, embody (are marked materially), and perform our racial designations and identities, whether those designations are self-designated or designated by others” (*Antiracist* 43). Because identities are embodied (and read into the body) our overt claims about the qualities of textual bodies rely on and reinforce covert claims about the student bodies that produced them. Together, these overt and covert claims conspire to implicate the writing classroom in a moral project—within a world we are attempting to save—and to locate



student bodies within that project, marking them (through marking their writings) as desirable, deviant, or disposable.

What I have been calling assessment's "overt claims" are the claims made about the quality or qualities of writing: *This paper has such-and-such desirable feature. This paragraph is missing this or could be more effective with that. Its errors are these. Its strengths/flaws make it this. This is/is not "A" material.* A richer consideration of assessment as assessment-rhetoric requires us to look beyond these overt claims, to consider also the covert assumptions that frame and contextualize them. Assessment's overt claims are always already accompanied by a moral infrastructure of meanings, underwriting them like a silent partner: *You need to write because of this. Meet these standards and you will be ready for that (college, career, life, etc.).*<sup>10</sup> *With/without good writers, the future (of the language, of the nation, of the world) will be such-and-such way.* To truly understand what a claim about writing (or a writer) means, it is necessary to excavate the sometimes-subtle ecology of assumptions and aims that shape any instance of assessment, supplying it with social form and force. These broader claims about the aims of writing surround and suffuse the technical claims more overtly made in assessment. Understanding assessment history means understanding its assessment-rhetorics: the moral claims that animate the technical claims we make about writings and writers. Each historical scene of assessment provides us an inadvertent rhetorical time capsules of sorts, preserving particular ways that writing, students, and the world's future were appraised relative to one another. It is time for us to crack these time capsules open and take in their lessons about who we have been—and about what responsibilities we have in response to that past. At a moment when we are dreaming a new future for the field, there is much perspective to be gained by revisiting the field's past dreams for the future.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps particularly, the emerging antiracist agenda in the field of writing assessment stands to benefit in important ways from a new beginning for writing assessment history, sensitive to social justice and attentive to race and racism. The critical potential of this work is hard to overstate: Writing assessment historiography can make important contributions to our understandings of race and racism in education because the writing classroom is an important gate-keeping space where disciplinary fantasies of linguistic and national belonging are enacted (see, e.g., Banks et al., Horner; Inoue *Antiracist*; Hammond, “Toward”; Harms; NeCamp; Wan), and where racially disparate impact and treatment can be examined (see Elliot, “Theory”; Poe and Cogan; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen; also Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*). Moreover, the assessment environments and practices that structure the writing classroom do *more than* privilege some racialized ways of being in the world at the expense of others—they also participate in the formation and reproduction of those ways of being. It is in this sense that Inoue talks about the “racial *habitus*” of writing education: “a set of structuring structures that are performed or projected onto student writing” (*Antiracist* 47), which encourage habits of writing and being that are associated with whiteness, rewarding and recreating the whiteness of education spaces (see also Inoue, *Labor-Based*; Burns, Cream, and Dougherty). Through writing assessment, student bodies are habituated to and normed against putatively “normal” ways of being, including ostensibly “standard” ways of speaking and writing—with departures from the “white racial *habitus*” serving to “race non-white students and discourses as remedial” (Inoue, *Antiracist* 217).

In helping to pattern the dominant *habitus* of the writing education, assessment reads and forms the student body by shaping and judging the habits of those who inhabit the classroom. The assessment habitus is at once technological and ideological: The instruments used to conduct

assessment (like prompts, rubrics, and portfolios) are encoded with a kind of “technological rationality”—a “bias for particular kinds of subjectivities, behaviors, competencies, and discourses,” which it valorizes as normal, natural, or desirable (Inoue, “Technology” 105). But, crucially, they are also surrounded and suffused with a moral rationality—a sense of why writing matters, and how improving student composition improves the world in some way. Though not discussed by Inoue in this way, we could say that the assessment *habitus* enacts an assessment-rhetoric of racial reproduction, reading students through their writings, but doing so in ways intended to advance an imagined “good”: promoting putatively desirable habits in the student body, an aim believed to benefit students and the broader social body of which they are members.

That this imagined good is one that may manufacture or reinforce racial inequality does not change the fact that its aim is to sponsor student progress—indeed, it is perhaps because writing assessment seems instrumental to the work of saving the world, so to speak, that its adverse racial consequences and causalities have been hard for the field to meaningfully reckon with, at least until recently (see, e.g., Inoue and Poe). More fully developing an assessment-rhetorical attention to how student bodies have historically been marked and formed through assessment would ensure that assessment scholars are well-positioned to participate in broader conversations about how race is constructed and how racism is enacted. The antebellum assessment innovations sponsored by Horace Mann present us with useful cases for this work—both because Mann and his colleagues self-consciously discussed assessment in moral and racial terms, and because the defamiliarizing distance of history might empower us to scrutinize aspects of assessment that would otherwise be too close to examine meaningfully.

## Articulating and Managing Difference: Race, Racism, and Eugenic Race Science

History-writing matters to racial justice in the field of writing assessment for another, equally important reason: Race and racism are historically conditioned, manifesting in accordance with the ecology of assumptions and aims operant in a specific sociohistorical space. Reckoning with these manifestations requires historical attention to what race is taken to mean within a local context, and to the ways that fantasies of racial being, belonging, and betterment fund racist hierarchies, violences, and projects. As the medievalist and critical race theorist Geraldine Heng teaches us, race is a potent social construction; something we make, and that makes us: “Race-making ... operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. ... [*R*]ace is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” (27, emphasis in original). In this kind of structural sense, *racism* can be understood as the name for any system that reifies and manages differences in ways that hierarchically oppress some and privilege others. If “race” is a rhetorical technology for defining and managing differences, racism is a matter of unequal structures, hierarchies, and the logics that underwrite them (see, e.g., Inoue “Technology”; Inoue and Poe; also Stein; Young). To study assessment-rhetoric in the history of writing education is to confront the rhetorical formation of race and the enactment of racism through the ways writing assessment reads and responds to student bodies.

As a rhetorical construct, race is supplied rhetorical meaning and substantive content not by nature but by society, with race being made in (sometimes subtly) different ways at different times and spaces. Nodding to this contingency, some writing assessment scholars have opted to use the term “racial formation” in place of more popular synonyms like “racial group,” drawing

attention to the context-contingency of group classification, helping “researchers to account for race without essentializing racial identity” (Inoue and Poe 6). Krista Ratcliffe identifies race as “a trope” for fundamental group differences that has historically surrogated—that is, *metaphorized*—a variety of substances (12-6; see also Morrison).<sup>12</sup> Henry Louis Gates goes further, telling us that race operates as “the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application,” noting that,

The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term “race” has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth (5, emphasis in original)

Protean in its shape and scope, race can be (and has been) made in ways that racialize not just the physical body, but also (or instead) the linguistic body and other non-somatic sites, including culture, migrant status, religion, and national origin. Any and all of these sites can be taken as an index of fundamental group difference, supplying race with its substance and social reality (see Heng; Villanueva, “Rhetorics”). Imbricated with racist constructions of human difference (Villanueva, “Rhetorics”) and encoded with a racist rationality (Inoue, “Technology”), writing assessments become an available means of slotting student bodies into larger social narratives, cultural projects and social configurations.

Remixing the idea that race is a trope of difference, we could say instead that race metaphorizes *belonging*, giving a name to the imagined sameness *and* difference of bodies, appraised and sorted for their desirability, disposability, or dangerousness. Importantly, racist inequalities can cohabit with and co-construct social inequalities of other kinds, not least of which are those related to (dis)ability—and, as it happens, Mann and his reformer colleagues regularly discussed (dis)ability as indexed to, or intersecting with, racial health and worth. Conceptual overlap of this kind should not surprise us, for social formations do not exist in

isolation from one another: “Race and disability are always imbricated with gender, sex, sexuality, and class,” Dolmage tells us (“Disabled” 27). What’s more, “disability”—like race—has historically served as a powerful trope for bodily difference and deviance, metaphorizing departures (in shape or capacity) from an idealized or “normal” body. Without denying the material reality of bodily differences, disability studies scholars like Douglas C. Baynton, Tobin Siebers, and Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell nevertheless have found that the rhetorical use of “disability” has served as a way to stigmatize, marginalize, or “disqualify” a variety of minoritized populations. Baynton writes, “not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them” (33; see also Dolmage “Disabled,” *Disabled*).

Nowhere is this cohabitation more in evidence than in the integrated racial project of eugenics—which, I argue, Mann’s phrenological project prefigures. “Eugenics,” as defined by Francis Galton, who coined the term, “is the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (35; see also Elliot, *On a Scale* 33).<sup>13</sup> Near-totalizing in its assumptions about what counted as “inborn” racial qualities, eugenic race science assumed that racial hygiene was manifest in a variety of bodily attributes and social characteristics (e.g., class, gender, nationality) beyond those, like phenotype or genotype, that might more immediately be thought of as “racial.” So-called eugenic “race betterment” involved policing hierarchies within and between groups, ranking bodies on the basis of their possession of putatively “normal” or “ideal” traits—often taken to be those associated with cisgender, straight, white, able-bodied and able-minded male bodies.<sup>14</sup>

What united eugenics advocates was not a stable construct of “human quality,” but instead the moral aim of improving that quality through monitoring and managing human bodies. The varied assumptions brought to this aim shaped the form it took, and informed the populations intervened in—resulting in interventions that ranged from immigration restriction and forced sterilization to the popularization of family planning services and the introduction of child development-centric school reforms (see, e.g., Dolmage, *Disabled*; Fallace; Hasian; Stern). “Progress,” “development,” “improvement,” and “betterment” (along with often-related terms, like “efficiency,” “normality,” and “purity”) have historically served as important eugenic commonplaces (see, e.g., Baynton; Dolmage, *Disabled*; Hasian; McCormick; Mitchell and Snyder; Snyder and Mitchell),<sup>15</sup> providing a flexible vocabulary for describing the quality of individual and national bodies, and for making claims about how best to intervene in them—including claims about intervention in-and-through education.<sup>16</sup> In his study of eugenic rhetoric in the United States, Marouf A. Hasian, Jr. calls “‘eugenics’ ... an ambiguous term that allowed many respectable Anglo-Americans to voice their concerns on a number of social issues” (14). The plasticity of “eugenics,” and the inclusive, integrated ways in which eugenic thinking defined “race” and “progress,” may have thus been partly responsible for the popular appeal of the eugenics movement among social conservatives and social reformers alike.

As a “rhetoric about the value of bodies” (Dolmage, *Disabled* 5), eugenic race science treated disabilities as primary targets for race betterment, seeking “to rid society of the characteristics that dominant groups consider to be disabilities in the broadest sense and, often by extension, people with disabilities” (Garland-Thomson 75).<sup>17</sup> In this way, “constructions of race and disability overlap ... throughout the history of American eugenics” (Dolmage, *Disabled* 14),

yet eugenic race science's configurations of bodily difference and value were dynamic, not static:

What counts as disability and who counts as disabled change over time and across cultures, as do the social or governmental initiatives mustered to eliminate them. What we now consider racial and ethnic variations, minority sexual orientation, behavioral deviance, criminality, aspects of gender differences, chronic illness, and even atypical temperaments have all counted as forms of biological inferiority understood as disabilities under the logic of eugenic science. (Garland-Thomson 75).

Put another way, all could serve as indices for eugenic racial hygiene—as sites for appraising and intervening in eugenic racial health. The school was one prominent space for eugenic efforts to monitor and manage the population's racial health, including tests of mental health and of intelligence, intended to gauge heritable qualities of mind (see, e.g., Elliot, *On a Scale* 32-97; Fallace; Poe, "Consequences" 271-2; Tucker; Winfield *Eugenics*). This dissertation contributes to existing scholarship on "race betterment" initiatives in education by recovering Mann's antebellum attempts to compose human progress through writing assessment. Writing—and English-language writing, specifically—served, for Mann and other phrenologists, as an important index of racial health, which experts inspect and improve. Student compositions mattered, in large measure, because they were imagined to say something about the bodies that produced them.

When my dissertation references "race" in the chapters to follow, my use of this term is intended to capture the plastic, capacious, intersectional ways in which Mann's phrenological race science would have understood "race": not just as a marker of inter-group differences, but also intra-groups differences along axes like ability, sex, and class. To underscore the importance of these other social formations to the phrenological project of race betterment through writing education, I will refer regularly to disability, class, and sex in the chapters to follow, describing their imagined centrality to the project of improving racial hygiene in the United States. I will



also draw not just on scholarship within the fields of writing assessment and critical race theory, but also on critical scholarship on the body from other theoretical traditions—most notably, disability studies. Centering “race” within my critical vocabulary is not, therefore, intended to crowd out consideration of other social formations, but instead to provide a tactical anchor for integrating and discussing them.

The benefit of using “race” in this way is two-fold. Most immediately, “race” is the term most-centrally used by Mann and his antebellum reformer colleagues to orient their efforts to compose social progress; my use of the term respects its historical centrality to the phrenological project that helps give rise to writing assessment in the United States. When Mann and other phrenologists talk about the health and quality of the body, they draw on the vocabulary of race to do so. No less importantly, my use of race in this way helps to complicate and deepen existing conversations about race within writing assessment scholarship. Questions of race and racism have been at the center of the field of writing assessment’s emerging efforts to theorize and promote social justice (see, e.g., D. Green; Hammond, “Theory”; Inoue *Antiracist, Labor-Based, and “Technology”*; Inoue and Poe; Molloy; Perryman-Clark; Poe and Inoue; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*; see also Stein). At the same time, other important social formations and injustices have received comparatively little attention, with several assessment scholars identifying intersectional analysis and disability studies perspectives as promising but under-engaged within the scholarship on social justice and writing assessment (see Banks et al.; Poe and Inoue 125). The new beginning for writing assessment history that this dissertation seeks to provide does more than center race in its analysis of the assessment past: it seeks also to broaden and complicate our historical understandings of what “race” meant within the history of writing education, revealing this term to have deep ties to beliefs about other social formations, like

disability. The history of race in writing assessment is, more generally, the history of the body—and fantasies for how to improve it. Assumptions and aims relating to (dis)ability play a starring role in this story: Race betterment is never just about race.

Because the meanings of “race” are partly dependent on rhetorical context, racist injustices can manifest in a variety of ways. For this reason, we might follow the philosopher David Theo Goldberg and others in talking not of racism but of *racisms*—alternative, overlapping “racialized exclusions” that appraise human difference using different racial rubrics, each authorizing and rationalizing a specific form of racist treatment or stratification (*Racist* 97-116). If dismantling racist inequality requires, on some level, rooting out racist assumptions and aims, it behooves us to acknowledge that the strategies of white supremacy are not monolithic, but are instead historically specific—and tethered to injustices of other kinds, like classism, ableism, and sexism. We diminish our analytic repertoire for identifying, naming, and combating racisms when we treat them as though they all draw from the same assumptions or pursue the same aims. The meanings of race are historically contingent and mutable, even as they are treated by those living at any given time and place as essential facts of life; failure to investigate these meanings, in their historical specificity, prepares us to engage with race, racism, and antiracism in only abstract ways. Historical work attentive to these specificities is precisely what is needed to build on recent efforts in the field to theorize race more capaciously and racism more dynamically by understanding each as *local*. The small but growing number of writing assessment scholars who have devoted substantive attention to race and racism have tended to posit race and racism as socially and historically situated, and formed by “local” forces—including, Inoue and Mya Poe tell us, “writing programs” (6). “Part of what makes racial formations ‘local,’” they write, “is how those formations are historically situated in particular

communities with particular social, political, economic, and cultural histories.” Understanding the relationship of race to writing assessment is necessarily *historical* work.

For writing assessment historiography to meaningfully support the field in theorizing and advancing racial justice, it needs—as a preliminary step—to engage “race” and “racism” as conceptual and experiential *presences* in our writing assessment past. It has yet to do so. At best, these remain “absent presences” in Catherine Prendergast’s sense of that term, with the relationship of race to writing assessment “seldom fully explored,” when it is discussed at all; race is often instead “subsumed into the powerful tropes of ‘basic writer,’ ‘stranger’ to the academy, or the trope of the generalized, marginalized ‘other’” (“Race” 36). While there are some encouraging indications that the field of writing assessment is starting to exchange the *absent presence* of race for a *present* antiracist agenda, the lack of revision to the field’s history remains a cause for concern. It is to this enduring absence we turn next.

### **Revealing Our Absences**

Though I will show in this dissertation that race, racism, and racial justice have always been part of the story of writing assessment in the United States, it would be reasonable to claim that within the more recent past, writing assessment scholarship has—with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Kamusikiri; Smitherman, “Black English”; White and Thomas)—been alarmingly slow to (re)enter conversations about race and language (e.g., Freire and Macedo; Smitherman, *Talkin*), race and print culture (e.g., Gates; Warner), and race and educational assessment (e.g., García and Pearson; Karier) that have been circulating around the field for (at least) the past few decades. It was not until 2012 that the first edited collection on the topic, Inoue and Poe’s *Race and Writing Assessment*, entered the field. In the intervening years, the

field has gained its first monograph that centers race, Inoue's 2015 *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, and has found itself taking a related social justice turn, which has thus far yielded two 2016 special issues (in the *Journal of Writing Assessment* and *College English*) and an edited collection: the 2018 *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*, edited by Poe, Inoue, and Norbert Elliot. Not without justification, this increased activity around race, racism, and racial justice gives the appearance that the field has started, belatedly, to shift its critical preoccupations.

The size of this shift, however, is easy to overstate. Much of the turns to race and social justice are attributable to a small number of productive scholars—the most active have been Poe, Inoue, and Elliot—and much of the conversation has been taking place *outside* the core journals for the field, cordoned off in books and special collections. Two decades after Prendergast identified race as an “absent presence” in composition studies, it still remains possible for scholars in the field to survey the academic literature on writing assessment, and to find talk of race and racism largely missing from the conversation (see, e.g., Inoue, “Racial Methodologies,” “Review”; Pimentel). Scour the scholarship in the two journals dedicated specifically to writing assessment, *Assessing Writing (ASW)* and the *Journal of Writing Assessment (JWA)*, and you will find that in the entire combined runs of these journals up until 2018, overt race terms—words like “race,” “racial,” “racist,” and “racism”—seldom appear (see table 1 below). Only 61 of the 368 articles published during this period include even one explicit reference to race (17%).

Table 1: Numbers and Percentages of Articles in the Journals *Assessing Writing* (ASW) and the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (JWA) that Contain Explicit Race Talk from 1994 to 2018

	ASW			JWA			COMBINED		
	Total Article s	# Race Talk	% Race Talk	Total Article s	# Race Talk	% Race Talk	Total Article s	# Race Talk	% Race Talk
1994	10	3	30	--	--	--	10	3	30
1995	8	0	0	--	--	--	8	0	0
1996	6	2	33	--	--	--	6	2	33
1997	8	2	25	--	--	--	8	2	25
1998	11	2	18	--	--	--	11	2	18
1999	7	2	29	--	--	--	7	2	29
2000	8	2	25	--	--	--	8	2	25
2001	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2002	8	0	0	--	--	--	8	0	0
2003	3	0	0	7	2	29	10	2	20
2004	10	0	0	--	--	--	10	0	0
2005	10	0	0	6	2	33	16	2	13
2006	11	0	0	--	--	--	11	0	0
2007	13	0	0	5	1	20	18	1	6
2008	13	2	15	--	--	--	13	2	15
2009	12	2	17	--	--	--	12	2	17
2010	11	1	9	--	--	--	11	1	9
2011	15	2	13	4	1	25	19	3	16
2012	16	1	6	4	0	0	20	1	5
2013	17	3	18	5	0	0	22	3	14
2014	24	3	13	3	1	33	27	4	15
2015	16	0	0	6	2	33	22	2	9
2016	16	3	19	12	8	67	28	11	39
2017	28	6	21	6	3	50	34	9	26
2018	23	2	9	6	3	50	29	5	17
ALL	304	38	13	64	23	36	368	61	17

Note: "--" denotes a year during which no articles were published. Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

Disaggregating this body of articles to compare those published through 2012—when *Race and Writing Assessment* was released—with those published in the years since, we find a shift in the amount of race talk in the field’s journals, but not a seismic one (see table 2 below). Explicit race talk appears in 13% of the articles through 2012, and in 21% of those published after. Zooming out to consider the state of race talk in these publications, it is worth noting that

the field’s explicit engagements with race and racism are more glancing than even the low numbers above indicate. Out of the *total* articles published in these journals, only 5% of the articles published deploy overt race terms 4 or more times. Race remains at the margins of our conversations about writing assessment—occasionally gestured to, but often ignored entirely. Racism is discussed even more rarely: only 7 articles (2%) in the past quarter century have even used the word, or one of its variants and derivations.

Table 2: Numbers and Percentages of Articles in *Assessing Writing (ASW)* and *Journal of Writing Assessment (JWA)* with Explicit Race Talk Before (1994 to 2012) and After (2013 to 2018) the Publication of *Race and Writing Assessment*

	<i>ASW</i>			<i>JWA</i>			COMBINED		
	<b>Total Article s</b>	<b># Race Talk</b>	<b>% Race Talk</b>	<b>Total Article s</b>	<b># Race Talk</b>	<b>% Race Talk</b>	<b>Total Article s</b>	<b># Race Talk</b>	<b>% Race Talk</b>
1994 - 2012	180	21	12	26	6	23	206	27	13
2013 - 2018	124	17	14	38	17	45	162	34	21

Note: Percentages are based off of the total number of articles published during that period (1994-2012 or 2013-2018).

If it is true that the histories we write about writing education play an agenda-setting role, the continued absence of race from the pages of writing assessment scholarship might be, in part, a byproduct of the field’s historical memory. In recent decades, histories of rhetoric and composition have had an increasingly rich and detailed engagement with roles played by race and racism in the pasts of writing education (see, e.g., Enoch; Gold, *Rhetoric*; Logan; Zenger), yet these histories seldom focus intensively on writing assessment. At the same time, specialist histories written about writing assessment have tended to be functionally colorblind, seldom

explicitly acknowledging race—much less assigning it a starring narrative role, fundamental to and formative for the field. With few exceptions (discussed in the next section), the histories populating the field of writing assessment have tended to be technocentric, attentive to changing methods of assessment (instruments, practices, etc.) and to the fraught politics of control over assessment (see K. Miller). These histories focus on *how* writing has been assessed and *by whom*, with comparatively little attention to *why*, or to how assessment has been mobilized to advance claims about student bodies. The general absence of explicit discussions of race and racism in existing accounts of writing assessment history may send an unfortunate, unintended message: that racial (in)justice is a concern marginal within, even irrelevant to, writing assessment—a part of writing education’s past that is unnecessary to acknowledge and that the field of writing assessment bears no responsibility for in the present. Writing Studies needs a new beginning for writing assessment history—one that clearly and explicitly sends a different message.

In calling for a new beginning for writing assessment history, I do not mean to suggest that existing histories have been without positive disciplinary value. On the contrary, they have served as vitally important touchstones within Writing Studies, helping writing educators to navigate the otherwise opaque world of assessment. In addition to mapping developments in assessment technologies, techniques, and trends (e.g., Huot and Neal; Yancey, “Looking” and “Brief”), the field’s existing historical overviews have helped writing educators in the United States and Europe situate their work within a broader, global history of writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons). They have also provided accessible entry points into ongoing debates and controversies in assessment, including those that involve questions of local control, accountability, and autonomy in writing assessment (e.g., Addison and McGee; Adler-Kassner and O’Neill; Huot; Lynne; see also K. Miller). Relatedly, historians of writing assessment have

offered a “usable past” to writing educators, tracing the shifting meanings of terms—like “reliability” and “validity”—used within the field to facilitate communication across disciplinary divides, linking educational measurement experts and composition instructors through a common vocabulary for assessing writing (Huot, O’Neill, and Moore; also, e.g., Lynne; Yancey “Looking”).<sup>18</sup>

Existing assessment histories have created a strong foundation on which future historians can build. And while few of these accounts have centered their analyses on identity and injustice, some of the best-known histories in the field seem to carve out a critical space wherein historical attention to these questions can flourish. Consider, as one example, the historical account provided by Kathleen Blake Yancey in the influential 1999 article “Looking Back to Look Forward,” which distills the recent assessment past into three general waves of technical development, “with one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing waves that came before” (483). The first of these is a wave of large-scale, standardized “objective” assessment, privileging “indirect” test items (that is, selected response “multiple choice” questions). A second wave follows, popularizing the holistic scoring of “direct” writing (that is, short answer or essay writing), then is itself succeeded by a third, more locally-responsive wave, which shifts the disciplinary current in the direction of portfolio- and program-based assessment. In narrating the history of writing assessment as a series of sweeping technical trends across decadal time, Yancey provides a useful periodization for thinking through how assessment priorities and practices have changed over time. Tricia Serviss has credited this kind of “panoramic” narrative of technical progress with helping to make the field of writing assessment “more accessible” and “recognizable to scholars working across discourse communities,” and



notes that the field now “invit[es] a revision ... that complicates the progress narrative” (209)—even if, to date, that invitation has seldom been accepted.<sup>19</sup>

The affordances of panoramic, progress-centric historiography double as limitations now in need of revision. In placing broad technical trends in historical relief, this kind of account inadvertently allows questions of the local human consequences and casualties of assessment to fade into the critical background. In this way, Yancey’s history does not dwell on the relationship of assessment to any student subpopulation or form of social injustice. Even so, Yancey comes close to calling for historical inquiry sensitive to student subpopulations when she writes that “writing assessment can be historicized through the lens of the self,” and asks us to ponder “Which self does any writing assessment permit ... [and] which self does an assessment construct?” (“Looking” 484). Moreover, Yancey (channeling Pamela A. Moss) invites us to consider how writing assessment functions *rhetorically*: “how ... do students and others come to *understand themselves* as a result of our interpretations, our representations, our assessments?” (498, emphasis in original; see also P. Moss 119-20). These assessment-rhetorical questions are vital ones for scholars investigating the relationship of writing assessment to race, racism, and social justice. When Yancey historicizes assessment’s rhetorical effects and “permitted” selves, she does so primarily in terms of the abstract writerly “agency” assessments allow or sponsor. Extending this line of inquiry, assessment historians could consider how, at different times and in different places, different *racial selves* might have been permitted, prompted, or punished by assessment. Yancey’s question about the rhetoric of assessment could also be read as a call for historians to re-enter the archives with an attention to the claims and aims of assessment—or, as Yancey puts it, assessment’s role “as shaper of students and as a means of understanding the effects of such shaping” (“Looking 498; see also K. Miller 16-22).

One way for assessment historians to begin responding to this call is to shift the narrative focus and scale of the histories they write, moving away from sweeping, panoramic historiography and toward a deeper, more detailed examination of the local meanings, consequences, and contradictions of writing assessment. In David Gold's words, "It is not enough to simply point to the past for evidence of practices that align with our own constructions of what is progressive, what is reductive; rather, we must examine how historical actors responded to their own contemporary exigencies, both micro and macro" ("Remapping" 24). What this means for writing assessment is a turn to histories of assessment-rhetoric, which reject the idea that "assessment" can be meaningfully understood outside a social and historical context, or when abstracted from the aims and assumptions of those participating in it. To pave a path forward for writing assessment historiography, we can take cues from the few extant histories of writing assessment to have taken up questions of race, racism, and racial justice—texts that have often been *microhistories* of writing assessment.

### **Microhistoricizing Writing Assessment**

The field's lack of critical engagement with race and racism might owe, in part, to the length and scope of the histories we tend to write. To date, vanishingly few book-length histories explicitly focused on writing assessment have been published (e.g., Carlson and Albright; Elliot, *On a Scale*; Trachsel), leaving the overwhelming majority of writing assessment history to be narrated in article- or chapter-length bursts. These accounts tend to take up the task of relating the entire sweep of writing assessment history in some way, limiting the depth of engagement possible with any individual actors, actions, or events.

Alternatives to this trend can be found in Elliot's monograph *On a Scale* and Tricia Serviss's "A History of New York State Literacy Test Assessment," both of which touch on the racist and nativist intellectual histories that have helped to shape writing assessment in the United States. The roots of psychometrics and large-scale mental measurement, Elliot notes, tie back to the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century eugenics movement, which supplied the conceptual foundation for statistically investigating (and ranking) human populations (*On a Scale* 32-97; see also K. Miller 72-84; Poe, "Consequences" 271-2). Writing assessment history thus dovetails uncomfortably with the history of scientific racism in Europe and the United States. Digging further into this connection, Elliot reminds us that the developers of the first large-scale intelligence tests in the United States—the World War I Army Alpha and Beta Tests, overseen by Robert M. Yerkes—were inspired by this eugenic effort to manage human improvement, as was Carl Campbell Brigham, the psychologist principally responsible for developing the first Scholastic Aptitude Test in 1926 (see also Lemann; Trachsel).<sup>20</sup> Though Elliot does not center race or racism in his historical analysis, his investigation of the intellectual life-worlds of assessment innovators and advocates provides the field its first substantive movement away from color-blind historiography.

Though never explicitly referencing *race* (or, for that matter, *racism* or *eugenics*), Serviss's article covers related historical ground, explaining how early 20<sup>th</sup>-century nativism provided an authorizing context for the emergence of mandatory literacy testing in 1920s New York State. Serviss recounts how in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, nativists "launched public campaigns to define literacy in narrow ways that seem to intersect and emphasize features like 'cognitive ability,' 'intelligence,' and a 'civilized nature,' as described by the Immigration Restriction League; these features and conceptualizations of 'literacy' were to be measured, then,

in the literacy tests” administered to immigrant populations (212). Development of the 1923 New York State literacy tests—intended as a requirement for voting eligibility (see Rejall)—was coincident with broader policy efforts to restrict immigration and the rights of recent immigrants. Carl Brigham plays a role in this story, as well. Brigham’s nativist best-seller *A Study of American Intelligence*—which identified innate intelligence as a function of race and national origin—was read by New York’s literacy test development committee, “premising many of their decisions upon Brigham’s correlations between intelligence, testing performance, and ‘authentic’ literacy” (Serviss 214). In Serviss’s history, the field gains a clearer picture of how the meanings and stakes of writing assessment are framed by broader social debates and imperatives. Writing assessment is never just about writing. Our histories of writing assessment should not be either.

More recently, Poe, Inoue, and Elliot’s *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* has called for historical scholarship to play a central part in the field’s social justice turn by helping to “liberate writing assessment from a view of itself as disembodied, technocentric, and ahistorical” (“Introduction” 17). Historiography, they assert, can “have profound impact on contemporary methods, policies, and consequences,” to the extent that it “reveals normative fixations and yields reflexive engagement” (22)—that is, to the extent it helps us understand the values and assumptions that underwrite assessment, inspiring us to think or act in new ways (see also Hammond, “Toward”; K. Miller 191-218). All three chapters on history published in this collection centrally take up questions of racial justice. Sean Molloy, for instance, finds in the City University of New York’s 1960s SEEK program a model for a socioculturally-responsive writing instruction and assessment. As a bridge and desegregation program, intended to combat racist exclusion, SEEK not only introduced an architecture for gradeless and penalty-less appraisals of student performance, but also “offered financial support,

counseling and tutoring” to students, “[r]ecognizing that social and cultural forces often caused student failure” (81; cf. Inoue, “Theorizing”).

My own contribution to the collection revisits the early history of assimilationist assessment advocated in *The English Journal* from 1912 through 1935, showing that Progressive Era policies of inclusion in the writing classroom often doubled as efforts “to contain and eradicate racial difference through assimilation or ‘Americanization’” (Hammond, “Toward” 43). And Keith Harms excavates the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of imperialist writing assessment imposed on students in the Philippines, under the colonial rule of the United States. This colonialist regime of assessment was imagined by its sponsors as morally righteous. They endorsed a “vision of social justice” that “depends on assimilation and a denial of heterogeneity,” conflating English language use with human development and civilizational worth (Harms 119). Taken together, these chapters provide a series of cases for thinking through “social justice,” and the promise and perils of how we define and pursue it. Constructs of social justice can underwrite antiracist desegregation and access-increasing initiatives, and they can also mask dangerous assumptions about human worth—and how to measure or increase that worth through writing instruction and assessment.

What these discrete micro-length histories by Hammond, Harms, Molloy, and Serviss share is that each provides a focused “microhistorical” case study, in the sense of that term intended by Bruce McComiskey: an approach to writing history that is richly and thickly detailed, employing “microscopic analysis and progressive contextualization” in a way that renders history “multiscopic,” equally valuing and dialectically employing both abstract narrative and concrete description in the service of historical arguments” (17). Microhistory toggles between the specific and the general, discovering new dimensions to the latter by

excavating the former's layers. As Gold puts it, "The key to understanding microhistorical approaches ... is that they do not merely describe a local scene, but use the local to illuminate larger historical questions ("Remapping" 26).<sup>21</sup>

Microhistorical case studies are particularly well-suited to the investigation of assessment ecologies, making space for exploring the contexts and the constellation of elements that make assessment possible, and providing room for teasing out the aims and assumptions at work in interpreting and using assessment data. Aims and assumptions, including those related to race. McComiskey finds that "the microhistorical method of changing the scale is ... predicated on the belief that social actors act on different levels ..., that these scales are actually embedded in phenomena, and that if we perceive only one scale, we perceive only a small portion of any total phenomenon" (McComiskey 18). So it is that when Serviss discusses literacy testing in New York State, this case yields more general insights and questions about assessment policy, and how teachers act within and in response to it. And when Harms tells us about English-language writing assessment in the Philippines, his work enriches and expands our disciplinary dialogue around "English Only" education and "the colonialist ways of thinking embedded in even progressive notions about language use" (131). Though not identifying themselves as such, these microhistorical cases trade out the field's technocentric, panoramic approaches to history-writing for an assessment-rhetorical sensitivity to local meanings, and to the ways assessment shapes and is shaped by broader social projects and aims.

Detailed, case-based approaches to historiography have already helped to complicate and deepen our understandings of the roles played by race in writing assessment history, yet even the best microhistorical work in this vein has tended to discuss the imagined moral mission of assessment only in abstract terms, with (at most) a gestural engagement with the ways the field's

social justice aims can be nested with unintended violences and dangers. The need for historiography of this kind—deeply and critically attentive to the moral aims of assessment—becomes apparent when we reconsider the mission motivating the eugenic assessment innovators and advocates Elliot names in *On a Scale*. Though Elliot does not dwell on this point, the eugenic assessment regimes advocated by Galton, Yerkes, and by Brigham were—as they imagined them—moral projects. In Galton’s racist moral framework, he imagined eugenics as a project of social justice, acting on and amplifying nature’s design:

Eugenics co-operates with the workings of Nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What Nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly. As it lies within his power, so it becomes his duty to work in that direction; just as it is his duty to succor neighbours who suffer misfortune. The improvement of our stock seems to me one of the highest objects that we can reasonably attempt. (43)

In eugenics can be found an authorizing moral framework that has the power to transmute sterilization into kindness and extinction into a social good: *Human improvement. Progress*. If this moral mission can activate the most desirable aspects of education, it can also authorize its worst violences.

Fields adjacent to writing assessment scholarship are in the midst of reckoning with the moral horror of the eugenics movement and other related “human improvement” initiatives. Education historiography has—over the past two decades—started the project of retracing the influence of eugenic aims in the past century’s education policy, curriculum, and assessment (e.g., Lemann; Winfield, *Eugenics* and “Eugenic”; Selden; Stein). During this same period, scholars of rhetoric have begun extending critical attention to the rhetorical influence of eugenics in a dizzying variety of sites, including feminist social and sex education reform (e.g., Hayden; Jensen), debates about genetics and heredity (e.g., Condit; Hasian), and immigration policy (e.g., Dolmage, *Disabled*, “Disabled,” and “Framing”). Yet strangely, for all this interest in

disciplinary spaces that overlap concentrically with writing assessment, it remains possible to read widely and deeply in the specialist literature on writing assessment without ever encountering the word “eugenics”—Elliot’s *On a Scale*, being an exception that proves the rule.

Reckoning with pasts like these is necessary both because of the damage and influence done in the name of “human improvement,” and because the core aim of eugenics remains uncomfortably close to practices and projects often considered benign, even benevolent. Through its brand of human engineering, the eugenics movement sought to promote progress—managing and maximizing human development. We fool ourselves to think that the work of education, and the writing classroom specifically, can ever be fully removed from the moral project of composing social progress *in* and *through* the student body. The question is not whether our education systems attempt to do so—it is how and why. History can, if nothing else, clarify some of the dangerous paths this work has taken in the past, preparing us to configure and pursue our work in alternative ways.

To find a new history for the field that actively and intentionally supports this critical work, let us flip back to the beginning of our existing history books, to the moment when Horace Mann declared written examination a new dawn for human improvement through education—a reform that promised “a new era in the history of our schools” (H. Mann, “Boston” 330). In many ways, this new era is the one we now find ourselves teaching and assessing in. Through close, microhistorical examination of the intellectual origins of this new era, we learn that the field’s disciplinary past is not what we had thought it to be, and that its disciplinary present need not remain as it now is.



## “A New Era in the History of Our Schools”

Horace Mann is best remembered today both for his popularization of public education (or “common schooling,” as it was then more often called), and for his outsized participation in a long-running intellectual tradition David Tyack and Larry Cuban call “tinkering toward utopia”—their name for how, “[f]or over a century and a half, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform,” which seldom realize the benefits projected onto them (1).<sup>22</sup> The Mann remembered by Tyack and Cuban “took his audience to the edge of the precipice to see the social hell that lay before them if they did not achieve salvation through the common school” (1). Mann feared the United States was going to hell in a hurry—consumed by vices like tobacco and alcohol, deprived by its tolerance of slavery, divided against itself by religious sectarianism, and intellectually dulled by an addictive overconsumption of popular media, in the form of “light” leisure reading. “In the reports of some French hospitals for lunatics,” he wrote, in all seriousness, “*the reading of romances* is set down as one of the standing causes of insanity” (“Third Report” 27; see Tomlinson 249-50). What seems to have worried Mann most was that new generations of children seemed to be receiving such insufficient mental and moral training that it jeopardized the country’s future. Writing at the top of his lungs, Mann declared: “IN A REPUBLIC, IGNORANCE IS A CRIME” (“Seventh Report” 417). Better than a corrective to this evil, education was to be the moral preventative, the savior of the new American republic and the savior of the people composing it (H. Mann, “Editor’s Introduction to Volume III” 37-8).

During his years as Education Secretary, Mann concluded that the state’s common schools were failing to deliver on their history-writing promise. The intelligence of Massachusetts’ children was too low. Better mental inscriptions were needed. Unable to directly

reshape education through an Education Secretaryship “[i]nvested with no formal authority” (Tomlinson 241), Mann set out to reform Massachusetts’ schools by means of writing “voluminously” (Cremin 136). He publicized the state of education through collection and circulation of his *Lectures on Education*, distribution of his *Annual Reports* for the Massachusetts Board of Education, and service as founding editor of (and frequent contributor to) the *Common School Journal*. Mann viewed “public discharge of [his Secretarial] duties” (“First Report” 384) as a matter of opening up the closed world of classroom instruction to public perusal, the marks of his pen literally *character-izing* education: the schoolroom and its students, reproduced as ink on paper, reformable bodies in the thoughts of the citizen-public.<sup>23</sup>

To aid in the formal examination of students and schools that provided the foundation for this publicizing work, Mann advocated adoption and use of what was, in 1845, a new technology: assessment by writing. “We venture to predict,” Mann told his *Common School Journal* readers, “that the mode of examination, *by printed questions and written answers*, will constitute a new era in the history of our schools” (“Boston” 330, emphasis in original).<sup>24</sup> Mann’s belief that the 1845 written examinations marked a historical turning point in education has come to be widely shared. Education historian William J. Reese has written that, “Before the summer of 1845, ... no one had ever given a common written examination in the United States on such a large scale, systematically analyzed and compared the performance of different classes, or used the statistical results to help change school organization or question teaching practices” (131). Indeed, within histories of writing assessment in the United States (e.g., Addison and McGee; Lynne; Williamson; Witte, Trachsel, and Walters) and more general histories of educational testing (e.g., Hanson; Madaus; Morris; Reese), Mann’s promotion of written examination is remembered as hastening (if not precipitating) a broader shift away from

oral examination. Mann maintained that this shift in medium brought with it a host of interlocking benefits—the full list of which has been summarized by several scholars (see table 3 below).

Table 3: Advantages of Written Examination Listed by Horace Mann in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” (1845)

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is impartial.</li> <li>2. It is just to the pupils.</li> <li>3. It is more thorough than older forms of examination.</li> <li>4. It prevents the "officious interference" of the teacher.</li> <li>5. It “determines, beyond appeal or gainsaying, whether the pupils have been faithfully and competently taught.”</li> <li>6. It takes away " all possibility of favoritism."</li> <li>7. It makes the information obtained available to all.</li> <li>8. It enables all to appraise the ease or difficulty of the questions.</li> </ol> <p>(Caldwell and Curtis 37; also Ruch 4)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. they are more impartial, asking all students the same questions at the same time;</li> <li>2. they are more just to the students, allowing them time to collect themselves and answer to the best of their ability;</li> <li>3. they are more thorough in that they allow the examiner to ask more questions and thus test a broader range of the students’ knowledge;</li> <li>4. they prevent the “officious interference” of teachers who occasionally prompt students with information that will help them answer the examiners’ questions;</li> <li>5. they determine whether students have been taught to apply what they have learned rather than just to recite factual information, the latter of which would indicate a failing on the part of the teacher more than the student;</li> <li>6. they eliminate the favoritism—both real and presumed—of the examiners; and</li> <li>7. they provide a record rather than a memory or rumor of the</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>It is impartial. (Boston 330)</i></li> <li>2. <i>This method is far more just than any other to the pupils themselves. (331)</i></li> <li>3. <i>The method under consideration is the most thorough. (331)</i></li> <li>4. <i>The new method prevents the officious interference of the teacher. (331)</i></li> <li>5. <i>It does determine, beyond appeal or gainsaying, whether the pupils have been faithfully and competently taught. (332)</i></li> <li>6. <i>It takes away all possibility of favoritism, and all ground for the suspicion of favoritism. (333)</i></li> <li>7. <i>[It results in] a transcript, a sort of Daguerreotype likeness, as it were, of the state and condition of the pupils' minds, [which] is taken and carried away, for general inspection. (334)</i></li> </ol> <p>(Witte, Trachsel, and Walters 19, emphasis in original)</p>
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	<p>examination—"a sort of Daguerreotype likeness, as it were, of the state and condition of the pupils' minds, is taken and carried away for general inspection." (1845, 330–34)</p> <p>(Lynne 19-20)</p>	
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Note: Numbering has been added within this table, for ease and clarity of comparison.

Within this list of features, Mann stressed the mechanical objectivity of this testing innovation, which could allow the same questions to be asked of multiple students simultaneously, all while reducing the potential of teacherly pollution of the sterile standardized testing scene. Indeed, in the intervening century and a half since Mann's death, educational and psychological testing scholars like G. M. Ruch, Anne Anastasi, and Otis T. Caldwell and Stuart A. Courtis have cited Mann's approach to written examination as presaging further moves in the direction of standardized or objective "new type" testing. As Michael Williamson might have put it, Mann's 19<sup>th</sup>-century written examinations are remembered as preparing the altar for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century "worship of efficiency" in education.

What's more, the figures of Horace Mann and his reform agenda have been invoked in writing assessment scholarship as historical reminders that education projects and innovations are always already social and political, reflecting moral beliefs about (and aspirations for) students, schooling, and society. In their historical overview of "Literacy and the Direct Assessment of Writing," Stephen P. Witte, Mary Trachsel, and Keith Walters describe Mann's written examination-based reform efforts as a continuation of a Protestant educational agenda that had long held sway in New England. Witte and his coauthors read Mann's underlying

project as emblematic of a “civic and religious” complex “that continues to the present time: the goal of education is to produce good citizens and to improve the morality of the society by inculcating the value of human improvability, whether under the guise of religious dogma or secular humanism” (15).

Witte, Trachsel, and Walters are not alone among assessment scholars in attending to the civic-religious undercurrent of Mann’s reform efforts. A similar description of Mann’s motivating assumptions can be found in Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neill’s *Reframing Writing Assessment*. While not dwelling on Mann’s support for written examination, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill nevertheless take Mann’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century work as exemplifying an enduring association “between education and the nation’s progress” (5), with Mann working to secure education “that would advance what he saw as the nation’s divinely inspired and fueled sense of mission” (7). Mann, as materialized by Adler-Kassner and O’Neill, provides historical evidence that our conversations about education and writing assessment have long taken place “within an ever-expanding galaxy of questions” that is constellated around assumptions about national belonging and progress, including “ideas about how America develops as a nation and what is necessary for that to happen” (5).

Yet when we interpret Mann’s aims to produce citizens and secure collective development, it is important we do so within the context of Mann’s assumptions about evolutionary development—assumptions that index national progress to racial and mental hygiene.<sup>25</sup> Mann was a committed phrenologist and believed the inscriptions made in the minds of pupils to be so indelible as to be inheritable, determining the developmental course of future generations (see Tomlinson).<sup>26</sup> He was particularly taken with the work of British phrenologist George Combe, whose transatlantic bestseller *The Constitution of Man* “demonstrated how the

physiological laws of heredity and experience governing the structure and development of the brain could be employed to adapt human behavior to the moral laws of nature” (Tomlinson x). Mann greeted this revelation of humanity’s constitutional laws like a new secular gospel, charting the path for human improvement. He found community with fellow phrenological travelers on this path—most notably, the reformer Samuel Gridley Howe, who joined Mann in the project to promote written examination in the common school (see, e.g., Reese; Tomlinson).

Mann made no secret of this indebtedness to phrenology and special fondness for Combe’s doctrines—connections his family continued to proudly publicize in the years following Mann’s passing. Mann’s second wife and first biographer, Mary Peabody Mann, described the intellectual foundations of her husband’s education agenda in no uncertain terms:

In speaking of Mr. Mann as an educator, I enter into his inmost life; for that cause, of all others, roused into action all his powers. He had always been interested in reforms; but no cause in which his duties as a citizen involved him held the same rank in his estimation as this. His interest and action in the cause of insane hospitals had deepened his insight into the primary causes and hinderances of human development; and the study of “Combe’s Constitution of Man,” which he met with in 1837, added new fuel to the fire of his enthusiasm. (58; see also Tomlinson xii, 242)

Prior to his ascendance to the Education Secretaryship for Massachusetts, Mann had served as a founding Commissioner for the Lunatic Hospital at Worcester, Massachusetts serving first a term from 1832 to 1834, then again from 1835 to 1839—his second term overlapping with his first two years as Secretary of Education. Where experience with Boston’s insane acquainted Mann with the sad lot of those suffering from mental derangement and deterioration (or “distempers,” in Mann’s preferred terminology), phrenology supplied Mann a conceptual vocabulary for the causes of (and cures for) mental distempers, along with—more generally—a system for mental measurement and management, which Mann believed could help coordinate the development of the rising generation.

As a mode of examination applied to the common school, *writing* became a scopic instrument for monitoring and managing the pedagogical influences that, as Francis Galton might have said, develop students' inborn qualities to their utmost advantage. Because Mann's pre-Darwinian beliefs about race and evolution regarded biology as malleable—moldable by habits—he regarded the quality of schooling and of student minds as largely one and the same. The common school existed to manage the student body, securing progress for students' minds; to examine one was, in effect, to gauge also the other. For this reason, existing historiographic treatments of Mann's written examination program as testing student knowledges (e.g., Lynne) or school effectiveness (e.g., Madaus) are only partially accurate—each limited by a dearth of direct engagement with Mann's understandings of human nature and heredity, and why schools were necessary to intervene in them.

Assessment historiography has tended also to ignore Mann's *other* contributions to writing assessment, beyond his general advocacy for written examination over oral testing. More's the pity. When we read more deeply about the 1845 city-wide assessments in Boston, then continue to follow Mann's path after 1845, we would learn that examination by writing was only the first of several assessment innovations to which the "tinkering" reformer could lay claim—none of which have been documented in existing writing assessment scholarship. As it happens, the 1845 examinations generated the first writing assessment data to be disaggregated and analyzed by student *race*. Administered in Boston's racially segregated common schools, these examinations were used by Mann and his colleagues on the city's Examining Committees to identify and publicize educational inequalities they believed were plaguing the city's Abiel Smith School, founded to serve Boston's black student population. Mann's sponsorship of writing assessment extended also to postsecondary education, with the so-called "Father of the

Common School” helping to introduce the first English language writing assessments for college entrance and placement, as well as the postsecondary writing education’s first co-educational peer-assessment classroom ecologies. Each of these innovations was imagined to be an important social justice intervention in and through the writing classroom. And each was informed by Mann’s passion for phrenological race science. An overview of them is provided below.

### **Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation works to update existing writing assessment scholarship by recontextualizing the rise of written examination alongside the phrenological “science of mind” that, for Mann, informed the need for education reform—and the relationship of (dis)ability, racial hygiene, and language and literacy to that need. Existing historiography on writing assessment—and testing, generally—has relied heavily on paraphrase to relate the viewpoints of those, like Mann, who have been identified as centrally involved in developing or promoting new assessment technologies. This methodological privileging of paraphrase has allowed historians to revoice educator perspectives in a manner that deemphasizes or tidies away their eugenic content. As a methodological counter-balance to this tendency, I intentionally rely on direct quotation more heavily than does existing historiography. I do so advisedly, having been taught by Susan Miller that “[i]ntriguing sound bites inevitably encourage a reader to imagine that a text was unified around a brief message or a scholar’s interpretation of it. Short quotations also hide the multiple discourses at work in even the most transient act of inscription” (*Assuming* 9).

In the words of Witte, Trachsel, and Walters, “The ways in which particular speakers have chosen to talk about literacy and about the assessment of writing ability—the metaphors they use, the comparisons they make, the issues they raise (and often fail to raise)—offer great



insight into the past” (31). In quoting Mann and those sharing in his assessment ecology regularly and at length, I attempt to preserve for readers the spirit and letter of their thought, and also (perhaps paradoxically) defamiliarize Mann and his assessment-based reforms. For those of us who have learned to regard Mann as something of an anodyne and comforting fixture of education historiography, encountering Mann’s own writings on race, ability, and progress might induce a kind of shock. This shock is one that provides us with new insights and questions regarding how we define and assess intelligence through *writing*.

In deepening and complicating our sense of writing assessment history, I build on and extend existing education historiography on the intellectual influence of phrenological thinkers like George Combe on Mann’s vision for common schooling, which laid the groundwork for public education in the United States (e.g., Messerli; Taylor; Tomlinson). The most sustained and detailed of these—indeed, the only book-length text devoted to the topic to date—is Stephen Tomlinson’s recent revisionist *Head Masters*, an unusually rich and textured engagement with the intellectual lifeworld inhabited by Mann and his fellow school reformers, like Howe.

Phrenology fueled them with fantasies of progress and a system for advancing it:

Convinced that the laws of exercise and heredity could be used to eliminate the degenerate and develop a more perfect Christian character, Howe and Mann embraced the eugenic doctrines of phrenology in the search for a superior New England bloodline. Phrenology provided the moral technology necessary for the control—and ultimate elimination—of the abnormal: the mad, the deaf, the blind, the mentally retarded, the deviant, the criminal, and the mulatto. (Tomlinson xv)

Scholars like Tomlinson have started to unearth this counter-history of common schooling by re-reading Mann along the grain of his phrenological beliefs. This shift in our memory of Mann, however, has not yet carried over into a critical reappraisal of our memory of the “new era” of writing education and assessment Mann advocated into being. Relatedly, within the more general historiography on educational testing in the United States, the best existing accounts of the 1845

examinations—principal among them, Reese’s *Testing Wars in the Public Schools*—have tended to extend, at most, a passing attention to the role played by phrenology in their emergence. Moreover, while providing profound insights about the social history and political potential of written tests, these more general histories of educational testing have often explored “writing” only as a then-revolutionary medium for testing, without substantive historical attention to the ways that the 1845 assessments were tests *of* writing, informed by assumptions and aims for written composition.

An interpretative gulf remains between the Horace Mann remembered a) in writing assessment histories, which elide Mann’s eugenic aims and phrenological commitments, b) in emerging revisionist education historiography that repositions the so-called “Father of the Common School” as heir to the patrimony of scientific racism, but that overlooks the place of language, literacy, and assessment within that ecology, and c) in more general historical accounts of educational testing, which may discuss phrenology or writing without centering and delving deeply into either. My dissertation works to bridge these historiographic divides, complicating and complementing existing scholarship by relocating “the eugenic doctrines of phrenology” at the center of Mann’s thinking on writing and written examination advocacy, while at the same time relocating writing and written examination at the core of Mann’s phrenological vision for education.

Setting the stage for the chapters to follow Chapter 1, “Daguerreotype Likeness of the Mind: Race-Writing and the Phrenological Origins of Written Examination,” recovers the ecology of assumptions and aims at work in Mann’s phrenological construct of writing: his beliefs about mental development and heritable ability, his theories of racial difference and hierarchy, his racialized notions of language and literacy, and his eugenic beliefs about the

purposes of schooling. Existing historiography has attempted to examine Mann's construct of writing without reference to these phrenological beliefs surrounding and shaping it. To more meaningfully understand what "writing" meant to Mann, we must grapple with the local world of meanings that "writing" participated in. Writing education was, Mann believed, a site for constitutionally re-writing and improving mental ability and racial worth—a process of human composition I call *race-writing*. Without adequate writing education and the active mental development race-writing provided, students might leave Boston's schools little more than "polished imbeciles," masked with an appearance of intelligence without its underlying substance, and contributing to race degeneration as a result. Writing was, as Mann constructed it, a means to eradicate this kind of imbecility in the New American race.

Having sketched Mann's beliefs about education reform as a vehicle for eugenic racial formation, the remaining four chapters of my dissertation each offer a different microhistorical examination of an assessment innovation Mann sponsored—each innovation, imagined to advance a social justice aim that would make progress possible. Together, these microhistorical cases of assessment-rhetoric reveal the centrality of race and justice to the project of assessment. Chapter 2, "Scoring the New Race: Error, Assessment Reporting, and Accountability in the Common School," uncovers the rhetorical origins of written examination and score reporting as instruments of *accountability*. Mann saw the page as a scopic technology through which pedagogical marks on the mind could be externalized and scrutinized. By this same token, written examination provided Mann and his colleagues, like Howe, a rhetorical instrument for publicly displaying the flaws that disfigured students' minds and stunted their racial development. Believing that schools were failing to adequately support students' racial development, Mann and his colleagues engaged in a complex feat of score reporting, introducing

new multimodal systems for public documentation and display of student performance. Boston's student bodies were being mechanized, Mann feared—mentally reduced to something more automaton than human. Through these score reporting systems, Mann sought to mobilize public sentiment to reform schools—so that these schools could better facilitate the race-writing formation of students.

The third chapter of this dissertation, “Students’ Right to Their Own Colonization: Fairness, Segregation, and the Exceptional Failure of Boston’s Smith School Writers,” provides a microhistorical examination of data disaggregation in the 1845 examinations, restoring attention to the writing assessment performance of one particular common school: the Abiel Smith School, which served an African American student population. Recovering the assessment reformers’ writings about this school—unreferenced and undiscussed in any existing writing assessment historiography—provides us with an early example of writing assessment’s relationship to the aim of *fairness*, while also affording us much-needed insights concerning how harmful assumptions about race, progress, and written performance can infiltrate and undercut even well-meaning attempts to promote equitable education. The reformers in no way actively opposed segregation in Boston’s common schools; they seem, in fact, to have tacitly endorsed it as a developmental boon. When attempting to ensure Boston’s black students were provided a fair education, Mann and his colleagues configured their understanding of fairness with reference to phrenological assumptions about innate black inferiority—ensuring that any material improvements made to the Smith scholars’ writing education would be alloyed with racist assumptions about their developmental potential.

The final two chapters of this dissertation travel with Mann after the 1845 examinations discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Following his time in the metropolis of Massachusetts, Mann

moved his family to the sleepy wilderness of what was then called the Middle West, relocating to Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he founded Antioch College—a school that has been entirely overlooked in existing assessment historiography. As of its founding in 1853, Antioch was among the country’s most progressive non-sectarian schools: A racially-integrated, co-educational school that provided men and women with identical curricular offerings. Less remarked on, but no less remarkable, Antioch College had in place a dynamic assessment ecology as of its first year of operation, including weekly writing assessments across its curriculum and an entrance examination in English-language writing—a full *twenty years* before Harvard first mandated entrance examination in English composition. Harvard has long been imagined by historians as the source for these innovations; the new beginning promised by this dissertation changes that.

Chapter 4, “Testing Humanity at Antioch College: Entrance and Inclusion in Mann’s Experimental Assessment Ecology,” contemplates the phrenological foundations of Antioch, as well as the college’s institutional uses for written examination as an instrument for regulating entrance and enacting the aim of *inclusion*. Entrance examination at Antioch served to rhetorically vouchsafe the inner racial worth of otherwise-suspect student bodies: women and African Americans. Course-level written examinations were used to shame inferior students into leaving Antioch, boosting the character of the college by rooting out those too morally or mentally infirm to complete curricular requirements. Through a close reading of unpublished institutional documents, I recover the untold story of two African American sisters—Virginia and Fanny Hunster—who were nearly expelled from Antioch on racial grounds. Mann ultimately intervened on the sisters’ behalf, arguing that their writings had earned them a place at the

college. For Mann, the second skin of the page substitutes and supplements other dermal tests of humanity.

The fifth and final chapter of my dissertation, “Sex, Composition, and Population Control: The Virtues of Theme Criticism at Antioch,” contemplates the ethics and erotics of writing assessment at Antioch. Co-education at Antioch has been a favorite site for historians of gender politics in education, but to date, no published scholarship on this college has attended closely to Mann’s beliefs about the biopolitics of sex—or the role writing assessment played in this co-educational scheme. For Mann and others on Antioch’s faculty, classroom writing instruction was a site for inspecting and inculcating *virtue*; peer assessment was an essential element in advancing this aim. Theme writing and criticism at Antioch provided a plastic instrument for reinforcing what Mann and his colleagues considered desirable habits of mind, as well as appropriate social exchanges between the sexes. Writing assignments were designed to inscribe moral precepts in students’ minds, instructor comments drew students’ attention to basic writerly virtues evident in their essays, and peer criticism structured social intercourse between the sexes—training students to equate characters on the page with the inner racial character of potential mates. Absorbed with fears of moral idiocy and Malthusian concerns about overpopulation, Mann propagandized co-education as a means of population control. Peer assessment provided students with opportunities for displaying the quality of their breeding and—Mann hoped—training them to be more judicious and restrained in matters of sexual reproduction, increasing population quality while decreasing population quantity.

Together, these microhistorical cases portraitize an early history for writing assessment that is more vibrant, more complex, more promising, and more troubling than the field has acknowledged. The history of writing assessment in the United States is also a history of race

and eugenic attempts to manage it. Moral aims and race science cohabitate in this past, twin engines of the assessment-rhetorics that Mann helped to set in motion. What we find when we return to his published lectures, speeches, and letters, is an explicit, regularly-referenced theory of writing education as an instrument of racial formation and improvement. We find, too, that written examination was—from its 1845 inception—a social justice technology for furthering this process, overseeing and publicizing developments internal to the classroom and the student mind. Herein we find a new beginning for the history of the field: The story of writing assessment, and how it was supposed to save the world.

## CHAPTER 2

### Daguerreotype Likeness of the Mind:

#### Race-Writing and the Phrenological Origins of Written Examination

*If we would have improved men, we must have improved means of educating children. ... Of all the means in our possession, the common school has precedence, because of its universality; because it is the only reliance of the vast majority of children; because it gives them the earliest direction, and an impulse whose force is seldom spent until death. Whatever advances the common school, then, will enhance individual and social well-being for generations to come. History must be written and read with different emotions of joy or grief, as they rise or decline; and individual minds will bear ineffaceable traces of their good or evil inscriptions. (H. Mann, "Prospectus" 14-5, emphasis mine)*

Readers who opened the inaugural 1838 "Prospectus" for the *Common School Journal* found themselves enlisted in a great and dreadful enterprise. The future of humanity, they were told by Horace Mann, the *Journal's* editor—then-Secretary of the Board of Education for Massachusetts—depended on a peculiar form of writing: mental inscription. Pedagogy marked the mind, composing the intellect and scripting the developmental course of both individual and population. Today, Mann is famous for championing the "common school"—a public alternative to the exclusive, dogmatically-religious private institutions he saw as dominating the educational culture in Massachusetts, and elsewhere in the United States. Putatively universal in their reach and inclusiveness, common schools were Mann's preferred system for psychological supervision of the growing American body politic, managing and ministering to the mental deficits of its people and—in doing so—governing the course of human history. Teaching students to write was one vital way that school masters were to deepen the marks made in their students' minds;



each thoughtful flick of the pen, a source of mental exercise. Through the inscriptions made in the common writing classroom—in the composition book and in the composer’s mind—the common masses could be made smarter and healthier; the fabric of society, stronger; the future of the United States, brighter. Through classroom composition, Mann believed it was possible to compose progress in the United States.

This old beginning for the history of writing assessment promises us a new beginning with new insights, because the Horace Mann familiar to the discipline bears only a passing resemblance to the Horace Mann who was writing assessment’s most vocal and prominent early advocate. This chapter re-introduces Mann, the celebrated reformer and self-styled race-former, as an important 19<sup>th</sup>-century theorist of writing, and—in doing so—re-introduces phrenology as a major intellectual and moral force in the history of writing education in the United States. Restoring this past revises and vivifies our historical memory for the origins of writing assessment by locating assumptions about race and progress at the center of that (hi)story, broadening conversation on writing assessment history to focus less narrowly on technical shifts in assessment method and design, and to more fully engage the social contexts and cultural meanings of assessment—opening up new space to examine its rhetorical claims and imagined moral aims. Opening up new space, too, for considering the historical interdependence of writing assessment discourse with contemporaneous rhetorics of science, technology, and medicine—a dynamic on full display when Mann limns out the purposes of writing education and champions student writing as mental photography. In returning to Mann’s antebellum theories of inscription, we learn that fantasies of racial matter have long composed beliefs of what makes writing *matter*—and, indeed, what makes writing *writing*.

For scholars of writing education, the central actor within the drama of instruction and assessment is often called the “writing construct,” our way of defining (or “constructing”) what writing *is*, and what assessing it requires.<sup>27</sup> Setting the stage for the chapters of this dissertation to follow, the present chapter traces how beliefs about race-writing provided the constitutive background for the construct of writing endorsed by Mann and his antebellum reformer colleagues—the writing construct operant at the origin point for writing examination. Re-*constructing* our memory in this way supports and expands efforts underway to theorize the social justice stakes inherent in how we define “writing.” Commentators within the field of writing assessment have movingly argued that when the definition of “writing” is constrained, narrowing what we privilege as “composition” worthy of that name, our assessments militate against diversity in the student body and in bodies of student writing (see Elliot, “Theory”; Poe, “Reflections” 333-4; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, “Introduction”).

Often, writing assessment scholars discuss the writing construct primarily or exclusively in terms of the range and span of writing performances examined by an assessment. Through its reconstruction of the ecology of assumptions and aims at work in Mann’s construct, this chapter models the importance of attending sensitively and intentionally to something “*more than*” the domain of tasks we take as indices of writing (see Inoue *Antiracist* 86-93). We more meaningfully comprehend the writing construct when we acknowledge its participation in assessment-rhetoric: the ingredients of any construction of “writing” include both technical claims about what counts as writing, as well as moral claims about what writing means—claims about how writing can be counted on to reveal something about writers and the worlds they inhabit. Our new beginning for writing assessment history provides a new beginning for the writing construct also.

In the first section to follow, I describe in greater detail the field's conceptual need for an assessment-rhetorical construct of writing, and sketch in general terms how Mann's interest in mental inscription was, in actuality, a phrenology-informed interest in a kind of human improvement I term *race-writing*. Combining this theoretical commentary with my historical recovery work, I argue that any effort to understand Mann's construct of writing outside of his phrenological ecology of assumptions and aims is destined to miss entirely the local meanings that inspired his antebellum writing assessment innovations. Next, I revisit the discipline of phrenology and review its unexpectedly rich historical relationship to writing instruction and assessment. Though dismissed in existing writing assessment historiography, phrenology provided an intellectual architecture for 19<sup>th</sup>-century theories of writing and progress, complexly informing rhetorical instruction, race science, and mental measurement technology.

Navigating phrenology's field of meanings, I devote the remainder of the chapter to locating and exploring three core-components of Mann's race-writing theory that, when taken together, compose his assessment-rhetorical writing construct: his beliefs about *human nature and the purposes of schooling*, about *the developmental significance of language*, and, at their intersection, about the ways *composition materializes and mediates progress*. Recontextualizing the rise of written examination alongside the physiological "science of mind" that, for Mann, informed the need for education reform, we come to understand how even at the dawn of formal writing assessment in the United States, "writing" named *more* than coordinated marks on paper—it named a complex system for mental measurement and management, freighted with assumptions about (dis)ability, racial hygiene, and language and literacy. In restoring the ecological complexity of Mann's construct of writing, the new beginning represented in this chapter models how writing is never merely about writing.

## Writing Constructs, Generic and Assessment-Rhetorical

Though principally remembered as a reformer, Mann was fundamentally a theorist of human form and formation. Through his educational writings and activism, he emerged as a leading intellectual on a topic that haunted the medical, scientific, and political discourses in circulation in antebellum America: racial health and improvability. When Mann claims, in the prospectus for his *Common School Journal*, that “individual minds will bear ineffaceable traces” of the pedagogy acting on them, he meant this more literally than existing scholarship has acknowledged. In this chapter, I recover how Mann’s advocacy for common schooling—and for writing instruction and assessment, specifically—were underwritten by his belief that the improvements made in the classroom were durable across generations. Mental inscriptions altered the composition of the student body, making a “good or evil” mark that was heritable by future generations. I call Mann’s inscription theory of human development *race-writing*: composing and augmenting the body’s racial substance by coordinating the impressions it takes in, and regulating the impressions it externalizes as written composition. And it is this inscription theory that supplied the ecology of assumptions and aims that gave writing its meaning for Mann—and that motivated and informed the emergence of city-wide written examination in 1845 Boston.

Writing had not always been Boston’s assessment medium of choice (see, e.g., Reese). The old era of schooling was one in which oral examination had been used to formally appraise student growth. The epochal shift Mann believed to be marked by written examination is that the *marks* on the page would lay bare the “good or evil inscriptions” made by school masters on the “individual minds” of their charges—a pedagogical history translated from private mind to public paper. By way of experimental reform, Mann’s colleagues in the Annual Examining

Committees for Boston's Grammar and Writing Schools conducted their 1845 examinations by soliciting, collecting, and analyzing student writing. Full reports were then published by both the Grammar School Committee (led by Mann's friend, Samuel Gridley Howe, working alongside Theophilus Parsons and Rollin H. Neale) and the Writing School Committee (which included William Brigham, J. I. T. Collidge, and Hiram A. Graves). In his 1845 *Common School Journal* article "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools"—the text of which he stretched across five issues—Mann reproduced and commented on these reports, famously dwelling on the importance of writing as a revolutionary medium for testing, which he explicitly equated to mental photography: "A transcript, a sort of Daguerreotype likeness, as it were, of the state and condition of the pupils' minds, is taken and carried away, for general inspection" ("Boston" 334).<sup>28</sup>

Written examination afforded a way to "capture, document, and preserve" the inner "reality" of the classroom world (Reese 229). In writing, the mind could be photographed, submitting the student body to new forms of appraisal. Here was the technology of publicity Mann needed. Print was to make possible a kind of assessment that neither lived on the lips of examinees, nor died in the ears of their examining auditors. Through the writings collected by the Examining Committees, the public could be given a clear picture of the mental inscriptions made in each common school classroom—and could push for reform, as needed.

The Mann we read about in existing historical accounts seems to have thought little about race, as it relates to education. Historian of education Lawrence Cremin has, for his part, declared of Mann's common schooling vision that "on the matter of race, Mann, who would be an uncompromising abolitionist when he served in Congress after 1848, was mute" (138; see also H. Moss 193). This chapter demonstrates that, on the contrary, Mann had much to say on the

topic of race, as it relates to schooling. Mann's theories of racial being and race-writing development were informed by his passion for phrenology, popular among many in the American elite as a science of race and of mental measurement. Race-writing through education was to be Mann's contribution to the phrenological project. He imagined the common school to be a space wherein the American racial body (represented in the *student* body) could be internally revised, constitutionally rewritten, and formatively improved. Not one to leave the American racial future to chance, Mann needed an objective instrument for monitoring, managing, and publicizing this process—visualizing and measuring progress, or its absence. Enter written examination.

In recovering the assumptions and aims that underwrite Mann's construct of writing, the field gains a historical wedge for opening new conversations about the moral infrastructure implicated in any conversation about the writing construct. Such a change would be a significant one: Much of the energy in the field's recent discussions about the writing construct has understandably been directed toward disputing its proper *scope*—with leaders in the field inveighing against assessment instruments that they believe inappropriately bound the domain of products and practices counted as “writing” (see, e.g., White, Elliot, and Peckham). This approach to debating the parameters of the writing construct addresses what I have come to think of as a genre-based or *generic construct of writing*—an approach to thinking about the writing construct in terms of the domain of writing genres it examines.

Talk of this generic construct of writing can be found in the field's regular dispatches warning of (or debating about) the dangerous limitations of a host of assessment artifacts and methods. Within recent decades, those most commonly singled out for construct-related criticism are multiple-choice testing and timed-impromptu writing (e.g., Hillocks; Purves; E. White,

“Response”), along with automated essay scoring (e.g., Condon; Ericsson and Haswell). William Condon, for instance, has lambasted mass-market standardized tests because they “under-represent the [writing] construct—the tests account for only a small subset of what makes good writing, and for the less important aspects of that” (104). In their stead, he recommends assessments animated by “the whole construct *writing*,” which he believes to be captured in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (103). This more representative writing construct would presumably shift the focus of assessment from the surface-level correctness, privileged by standardized testing to the sites of writing privileged by the *Framework*: students’ “habits of mind” and the range and depth of their “experiences with writing, reading, and critical analysis” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project 2).

There is, of course, nothing inappropriate about debating the technical parameters of what counts as writing. Such debate is, in fact, necessary; without it, it is hard to imagine there being a field of writing assessment at all. But where the social (in)justice of assessment is concerned, generic considerations of the writing construct’s capaciousness tell us only part of its story—and not always the most important part. In his history *On a Scale*, Norbert Elliot reviews the repercussions of past assessment regimes, and finds that “[t]he flaws are not solely in the tests that we design but rather in the ways the tests are used” (355)—that is, in our uses of assessment to draw inferences and make decisions about writers, making claims about their fitness and the consequences that befit them.

These dimensions of writing assessment—beliefs about what writing is *for* and how it can be used to *assess writers*—are beyond the critical reach of the generic construct, despite their obvious and important role in defining the meanings and uses of writing. As a way to open up

dialogue about the writing construct to a consideration of the ecology of meanings that surround and suffuse “writing,” my historical consideration of antebellum assessment focuses on what I call an *assessment-rhetorical construct of writing*, a way of thinking about the writing construct that acknowledges that it is in dynamic exchange with constructs of other kinds: shaping and shaped by our beliefs about writers, about ability, and the purposes of schooling, among other things. To consider the writing construct as assessment-rhetorical is to contemplate how bodies of writing exist—and are understood—in relation to bodies of other kinds.

This approach to thinking about the “writing” in writing assessment is indebted to a longer tradition of thought in Writing Studies. As it happens, scholars of writing have long argued that our constructs of writing are complexly informed by context, contingent on socially- and historically-conditioned expectations and aims. Susan Miller teaches us that composition is a “cultural site” (“Composition” 23), shaped and saturated by broader cultural anxieties and imperatives (see S. Miller *Textual*). When James A. Berlin describes “how the composing process is conceived and taught in the classroom” (2), he claims that our conceptions of *writing* are rhetorically contingent on an underlying “conception of reality, of human nature, and of language” (1)—a conceptual “field” of beliefs that “directs the behavior of the teacher and student in the classroom, making certain kinds of activity inevitable and other kinds impossible” (2). And in this spirit, Asao Inoue has charged that the constructs animating our assessments can be thickly laden with beliefs and biases about *race*, surreptitiously shaping “our notions of language use and its value” (*Antiracist* 36), which in turn frames “the writing construct used as a standard by which all performances are measured” (35). He enjoins us to ask, “Where does the writing construct in the assessment come from?” and “How might the instrument used to measure the writing construct, *or the construct itself*, be biased toward particular kinds of



racialized writing behaviors, competencies, or dispositions?” (“Technology” 113, emphasis mine).

In endorsing a construct of writing, then, we endorse also the constructs imbricated with writing—not least of which are the interlocking constructs of mind, race, ability, language, and progress. To set the critical stage for understanding Mann’s social justice assessment-rhetorics (*accountability, fairness, inclusion, and virtue*; each, the focus of a subsequent chapter), this chapter dwells on his assessment-rhetorical construct of writing. By doing so, this chapter doubles as a demonstration that thick layers of cultural meaning line even the most seemingly simple assessment of writing. We hazard significant historical distortion when we divorce Mann’s premier education reform technology—his daguerreotype likeness of the mind—from the phrenological assumptions and exigencies scripting his fervor for reform. If Mann is to be taken at his word, his foundational advocacy for *assessment by writing* can only be meaningfully understood in light of his phrenological beliefs and commitments—beliefs and commitments regarding race-writing that shape his writing construct.

### **Phrenology on the Mind**

To think of phrenology today is, for many of us, to conjure the mental image of a human head (see fig. 1), sectioned into a butcher’s chart of faculties: *destructiveness* hovers right above the ear; *parental love* (or “philoprogenitiveness”) is located in the hind-brain, right above *amativeness*, found in the back-most cradle of the skull. *Language*, tellingly, is located right below the eyes, suggesting an indissoluble link between communicative capacity and sight, which—among other things—enabled the intelligent detection of written words. This neuroanatomical map, locating character traits in sections of the brain, oriented what was

arguably the 19<sup>th</sup>-century’s most popular school of mental measurement. To the phrenologist, the head’s “phrenological organization gives the very best biography of a person that can be furnished” (Fowler, *Hereditary* 181-2). Examine this phrenological organization, and you read not just the mind, but the body’s history: its origins, its habits, and perhaps also its possible futures.<sup>29</sup>

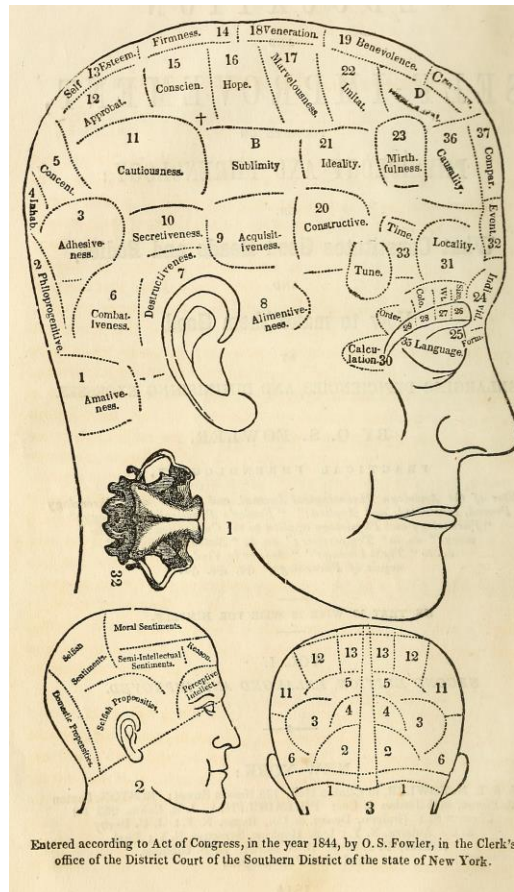


Fig. 1. Frontispiece from O. S. Fowler’s 1844 *Education and Self-Improvement*, depicting a head in profile, subdivided into phrenological faculties.

Armed with some calipers and a pen and paper, the phrenological expert could take down a patient’s cranial dimensions—meticulously inscribing them into a chart, accompanied in some cases by notes about the patient’s lifestyle and demeanor. The human head is (de)composed into a data object: a skull in the shape of a series of measurements. To the phrenologist’s eye, these

data reveal the mind's secrets, exposing its tendencies and qualities. Charting the human form in this manner was believed necessary because the size of the skull alone told few tales worth hearing. Behavior exercised and augmented the body's capacities, improving or impairing them. In the words of America's most enterprising and famous phrenologists, Orson Squire ("O. S.") and Lorenzo Niles ("L. N.") Fowler, "Most great men have great heads. . . . The phrenological law is, that size, other things being equal, is a measure of power; yet these other conditions, such as activity, power of motive, health, physiological habits, etc., increase or diminish the mentality, even more than size" (50). The somatic body becomes a body of writing on paper, arrayed for assessment by a phrenological expert.<sup>30</sup> Human *and* writing assessment, in one.

Phrenology was far from a fringe movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and the United States. Hotly debated in medical journals and the popular press, phrenology enjoyed widespread public and expert appeal—including by those, like Mann, who sought to reform and improve formal education (see, e.g., Colbert; Cooter; Tomlinson). Oddly, though, the phrenology's fascination with mental measurement has attracted limited historical interest within recent writing assessment scholarship, despite the field of writing assessment's close engagement with psychometric history and theory (see, e.g., Elliot *On a Scale*; Lynne). Often as not, writing assessment scholarship has tended to invoke the specter of "phrenology" as an invective, rather than reckon with it as a genuine part of the field's intellectual history. Like a ghostly floating signifier, "phrenology" comes to attach to a variety of actors, actions, and artifacts argued within the field as being disreputable or discreditable (see, e.g., Carlson and Albright; Osenburg; E. White, "Issues" 12, and "Language" 193; see also Hanson; L. Mann). Thus, as one example, in the *College Composition and Communication* article "Objective Testing, the New Phrenology,"

F. C. Osenburg enlists the figure of phrenology to inveigh against the absurdity and harm of standardized multiple-choice (that is, “objective”) assessment:

There is good reason to suspect that the freshman’s inability to read well or the senior’s more than occasional inability to write sensible English owe much to the support that the multiple-choice vocabulary test lends to sloppy thinking and to careless expression. Containing the sort of over-simplification that has always fascinated the child, the mystic, and the mentally lazy, it measures vocabulary in about the same way the old carnival *phrenologists* measured intelligence and personality. (108, emphasis mine)

Phrenology, as Osenburg discusses it, is a caricature emptied of almost all content, symbolizing an assessment regime that is equal parts farcically misguided and intellectually toxic.<sup>31</sup>

By far, the most detailed and compelling treatment of phrenology’s role in the history of writing assessment can be found in David Lee Carlson and James Albright’s *Composing a Care of the Self*, which charts the rhetorical influence of medical discourse in shaping late-19<sup>th</sup>-century writing assessment in the United States. The emerging health sciences of this period sought to “textualize the body,” developing new instruments for reading and cataloguing its features and ailments (31). In tandem with this trend, the writing classroom sought to *em-body* the text, configuring students’ writings as a “verbal body,” a term Carlson and Albright adapt from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century educator Brainerd Kellogg to capture this period’s medicalization of student writing. “For the field of English education,” they write, the entity of concern was the ‘verbal body,’ or the mind, which included the pupil’s proper temperament and rational mind, both of which reflected health and disease of the student (e.g. moral, physical), and the health and disease of the verbal” (35).

The role played by phrenology in this historical narrative is as a paradigmatic precedent for the diagnostic and therapeutic impulses on display in the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century writing classroom. The phrenologist’s readings of the somatic body (through the skull) anticipate the secondary

school teacher's readings of the verbal body (through the page)—though Carlson and Albright understand this influence to be indirect and abstract, phrenology and English education shaped by shared “medical rationalities and metaphors” (16). Assessment of the verbal or “compositional body” (31) is, for them, a new and separate stage of medical-and-mental management: “There is movement beyond phrenology. Tracing thoughts into compositions replaced tracking the ridges of the skull” (37). The analogy made here between assessing skulls and compositions is an apt one; indeed, more apt than even Carlson and Albright indicate. The lines of influence binding writing assessment to phrenology are intimate, intricate, and immediate. In this chapter, I show that when formal writing assessment entered the American schoolroom in the antebellum midcentury, it did so as *part* of the phrenological movement, not *beyond* it.

What's more, throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, phrenology enjoyed popular currency in the United States as something more than a medical discourse in circulation among self-styled mental measurement experts. Phrenology served also as a surprising site for rhetorical education, providing Americans with a common conceptual vocabulary for communicating about the moral aims of character formation progress (see, e.g., Colbert; Hasian 17-9), and a framework for exercising and cultivating their mental faculties—including those mostly associated with the five canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (see Fowler, *Education*; also Logan 48, 144). A connection between rhetoric and phrenology—a variant of faculty psychology that enjoyed Transatlantic popularity—should not surprise us, considering the well-known primacy of faculty psychology and its doctrines of “mental discipline” to 19<sup>th</sup>-century composition-rhetoric (see, e.g., Berlin; Crowley, *Methodical*; Johnson, *Nineteenth-Century*;

Kitzhaber). The classic summary of the rhetorical ideal of “mental discipline” is provided by Albert Kitzhaber:

The human mind was widely regarded as consisting of certain faculties or powers: the will, the feelings, the judgment, the imagination, etc. It was believed that these faculties could be exercised and strengthened in much the same way as muscles. Educators, therefore, saw their function as twofold: to discipline and strengthen these separate faculties through drill and exercises; and secondarily to supply the student with a store of general principles in the light of which his trained faculties would, in later professional life, make needed particular applications. (2)

While historical accounts of rhetorical education during this period seldom mention phrenology by name, leading 19<sup>th</sup>-century theorists of rhetoric like Alexander Bain and Richard Whately imagined their work as consistent with phrenology’s new science of mind. Bain, in fact, wrote an entire treatise on the subject—*On the Study of Character, Including an Estimate of Phrenology* (see also Hartley 110-41; Wade 782)—and Whately was both a personal friend of Combe and a public advocate for Combe’s phrenological faculty psychology.<sup>32</sup>

Deciphering the developmental messages hidden in the bumps and folds of their skulls, phrenologically-curious amateurs could gain a kind of rhetorical self-knowledge, learning about their physical and mental capacities, locating themselves in the great chain of human development, and charting what was believed to be a scientifically-backed course of self-improvement. Shirley Wilson Logan gives us a general sense of phrenology’s pedagogical appeal when she tells us of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century rhetorical self-education of Mary Virginia Montgomery, “a young black woman, living a relatively comfortable but busy life on a postwar former Mississippi slave plantation” (Logan 46). Montgomery left behind an 1872 diary, documenting her routine of completing composition exercises from a textbook by Richard Green Parker (Logan 48)—incidentally, the *same* Richard Green Parker whose *Progressive Exercises* was adopted for use in Boston’s common schools during Mann’s time as Education Secretary,

decades earlier (see Chapters 5 and 6). Hovering in the background of Montgomery's self-sponsored composition training were "the interrelated topics of phrenology and self-culture" (that is, self-cultivation), which she favored over all her other readings (Logan 47).

Montgomery's engagements with phrenological self-culture would have been a rhetorical *self*-education in at least two ways—her studies, autodidactic and also enabling a kind of knowledge of the self.

Phrenology might be remembered today as a curiosity from a bygone medical culture, but Logan reminds us that the appeal of phrenology had as much to do with the moral aim of self-betterment as it did with the science of mental measurement: "Interest in phrenology ... frequently merged with an interest in self-improvement under the belief that a knowledge of one's mental strengths and weaknesses would aid in developing self-improvement strategies. ... Montgomery probably felt that if she could gather enough information about her own capacities, she could improve herself more effectively" (47). The historian Janet Sharp Hermann, whom Logan cites, describes Montgomery's passion for phrenology in a more pointed fashion, registering the spirit of self-assessment and pursuit of purification that—as we will find in the pages to follow—regularly pervade phrenological thinking. "If she could only read her skull shape properly," Hermann writes, "she might learn to know her own weaknesses and work to eliminate them" (169). Propelled by this goal to improve—to eliminate one's weaknesses and rewrite one's abilities—Montgomery's rhetorical self-education comes into new focus. Montgomery's composition work could be read as one vent for her phrenology-informed "drive for self-improvement," structuring opportunities for her to exercise and augment her mental faculties. Write well and you can gradually rewrite the mind, even constitutionally rewrite the body—a promise central to Mann's construct of writing and discussed at length below.

Appropriately, perhaps, Montgomery's diary documents her attempt to compose an essay on the subject of "progress," and that—while "working late" on the text—Montgomery nevertheless was unsatisfied with the fruits of her labor (48). The phrenological work of *progress* apparently never quite feels complete.

### **Mental Daguerreotypes: Race-ing Our Memory of Phrenology**

Apparently, Montgomery did more than read whatever phrenological tomes were close to hand. She was an active subscriber of the country's leading publication on the subject, the *Phrenological Journal* started by Orson Squire Fowler and Samuel R. Wells (Hermann 169; Logan 47). She even purchased additional specialty texts on the topic, like Orson and Lorenzo N. Fowler's *Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology*, as well as phrenological "charts and a model human head" to practice the art of mental measurement—appraising and entitling mental ability and character (Hermann 169).<sup>33</sup> Through these phrenological texts, Montgomery would have also gained access to one of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century's premier sciences of mental measurement, phrenology was also a leading sponsor of race science. Taking body shapes and differences in phenotype as indicia of inner being and worth, phrenology proposed itself as a science for scrutinizing, sorting, and scaling populations—offering instruments for measuring ability *within* and *between* racial groups. Remembering phrenology in this way—*race-ing* our disciplinary memory of it, rather than erasing race from consideration—we gain access to a new way of thinking about race science: not as a fringe doctrine we can comfortably dismiss as marginal within writing assessment history, but as a central rhetorical node and adhesive within the field's past, binding 19<sup>th</sup>-century beliefs about faculty psychology, visual culture, and writing education.<sup>34</sup>



Cracking open the issues of the *Phrenological Journal* that Montgomery seems to have read over the course of 1872, it becomes immediately apparent that the knowledges of the self and others enabled by phrenology were, more specifically, knowledges of the racial self and the racial other.<sup>35</sup> From Fowler and Fowler's *Self-Instructor*, Montgomery would have been taught to interpret vocal expressions and physiognomy as signs of inner mental health and racial character. "Those whose voices are clear and distinct have clear minds," Fowler and Fowler declare, elsewhere coaching their readership to believe that "[t]he barbarous races use the guttural sounds more than the civilized. Thus Indians talk more down the throat than white men, and thus of those men who are lower or higher in the *human scale*" (*Illustrated* 30, emphasis mine). Expression *expressed* something about its source. The Fowlers' phrenological scheme, beloved by Montgomery, was nevertheless explicitly and avowedly a white supremacist race science, identifying "white" expression and "light" features with development on the "human scale," as they call it: "coarseness of skin and hair indicate a coarse-grained brain, and coarseness of mind.... Hence dark-skinned nations are behind light-haired in all the improvements of the age, and the higher finer manifestations of humanity" (Fowler and Fowler, *Illustrated* 30). This belief that humans existed on a scale of development and worth—a belief cherished by Mann as well—funded phrenological investments both in racist social stratification *and* a belief in human improvability. Human difference was tantamount to deviance, but all racial groups existed on a developmental continuum; through proper exercise, one's position in this scale could conceivably be changed.

Horace Mann inherited and innovated on these phrenological assumptions, locating phrenology's core tenets of assessment at the center of his worldview: the body and its behaviors index mental and moral being, testify to racial belonging, and disclose human worth. To read the

skull—inspecting its bumps and divining their lessons—was to read the mind, to take the measure of one’s humanity and, at scale, to take stock of human progress. Those who remember Mann’s reforms as religious in character are correct only in an abstract sense; Mann believed the physical constitution of humanity was divinely ordained, and that to act in accordance with natural law was to follow the dictates of God. Phrenology provided Mann a Christian science, and it is against this backdrop that he wrote to his friend Samuel Downer on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1856 to express concern over the latter’s wellbeing. “I am truly grieved to hear of your health, or rather your want of it,” Mann writes, adding a tender barb: “That glorious brain of yours wanted only one thing more, that is, a little stronger bump of obedience to god’s laws.” (Horace Mann to Samuel Downer, 5 Mar. 1856).<sup>36</sup> In Mann’s conceptual vocabulary, the religious (god’s laws), the behavioral (health-securing obedience), and the somatic (Downer’s cranial bump) all occupy the same phrenological register.

It would be a mistake, though, for us to think of Mann as interested in cranial measurements alone. As was the case with phrenology’s founding thinkers Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Spurzheim—and with Mann’s mentor, the phrenologist George Combe—Mann’s approach to reading the human form extended beyond the skull to include other regions of the body and regimens of behavior that he considered symptomatic of mind. Indeed, if Mann’s extant writings are to be trusted, he was considerably *less* interested in rigorous inspection of the skull than in triangulating the mind against a host of examinable bodily features and behaviors.<sup>37</sup> In this more expansive treatment of the body as text, Mann was by no means out of keeping with the intellectual elite of his day. Allan Sekula reminds us that “by the mid-nineteenth century a single hermeneutic paradigm had gained widespread prestige. This paradigm had two tightly entwined branches, physiognomy and phrenology. Both shared the belief that the surface of the

body, and especially the face and head, bore the outward signs of inner character” (10-1). Mann extended this belief that surfaces confessed their inner depths to a diversity of bodies—including bodies of writing.

Traditional phrenological readings of the head were but one mode of a broader physiological science that encompassed, in Mann’s view, “both the laws of life and hygiene, or the rules and observances by which health can be preserved and promoted” (“Sixth Report” 131). Mann’s phrenology-informed physiology understands humanity as threatened by racial decline and the proliferation of disability. Humanity also contained untapped racial promise, Mann believed, meaning that “if for three or four successive generations there could be perfect obedience to those beautiful and sublime laws which the science of Human Physiology reveals, then would the earth be glorified by a new race”—a race of “Apollons, not orang-outangs [sic]” (“A Few Thoughts On” 111; cf. Bindman; Tomlinson 290). Education is the axis around which humanity’s future pivots—the race-writing apparatus that determines which new race is ushered into being. Humanity, as Mann imagines it, exists on a sliding scale of racial development, at the top of which sits the (enlightened, white, male) Apollonian body. At the opposite end of the scale can be found the “orang-outang,” the dreadful symbol of humanity’s backward slide into bestiality. Mann’s insistence on the need for systemic physiological intervention scripts a kind of eugenics *avant la lettre*.

Mann was not alone in his fantasies of race betterment. Decades before the formal emergence of a eugenics movement as such, phrenology “provided a lexicon that was used by intellectuals and laypersons alike in their discussions of the fit and unfit in America. Influential writers including Benjamin Rush, Daniel Webster, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Walt Whitman accepted phrenology in whole or in part” (Hasian 17). Best remembered today for founding the

United States' first school for the blind, Howe played a central role in helping Mann usher written examination into being, not only serving on Boston's 1845 Grammar School Examining Committee, but also acting as head author of its report on that year's examinations—the very same report Mann edited and recirculated in his “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article (see Reese; Richards; Tomlinson). The initial idea for written examination may have even been Howe's (Richards 175), and in any event, he took pride being “openly pledged to support all [Mann's] measures” (Howe, *Letters* 179), seeming even to revel in the political notoriety and opposition that accompanied their assessment efforts. Every bit as committed a phrenologist as Mann, Howe shared also Mann's belief that education was a means for race-writing. In an 1845 letter to Mann, sent around the time of the examinations, Howe mused on the importance of their assessment efforts: “if the country and the race can be speeded on its great work of progress and improvement it must be by the education of the young” (Howe, *Letters* 178; see also Reese 54-6; Tomlinson).

Mann and Howe believed wholly in the same moral mission for education: race betterment. It is against this backdrop that we must understand their hopes for common schooling—and for written examination, specifically. Note, for instance, the eugenic undertone when Mann instructs the people of Massachusetts in his ninth *Annual Report*—released the same year as his writing assessment-promoting article “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools”—that education is necessary to halt or reverse the course racial decline among those of low intelligence and low morals, warning that “the same nature by which the parents sunk into error and sin pre-adapts the children to follow in the course of ancestral degeneracy” (“Ninth Report” 5). Absent the guiding hand of educational experts, the nightmarish future Mann foresaw was a grotesquerie of disease and debility. “Man alone,” he frets,

of all the earth, pales and dwarfs and sickens; begets children, the parti-colored tissue of whose existence is the woof of one disease woven into the warp of another; transmits insanity and gout and consumption and scrofula; procreates blindness and deaf muteness and those human *fungi*, the brainless idiots; spawns polished imbecility through our cities, which they, by their wealth, send to college, to be converted into pillars of Church and State. (*Dedication* 49-50, emphasis in original)

Notably, Mann's concern is not only that a lack of eugenic self-management would allow overt disability to proliferate unchecked. He worries also that the dysgenic threat might somehow masquerade as normal and healthy stock, and—perhaps under cover of affluence—pass through the gates of the academy into the corridors of power, the seats of American spiritual and political governance secretly polluted with “polished imbecility.” Systems were needed to more closely inspect and correct students, lest they corrode the pillars that uphold the nation. Written examination provided one component of this system: a screening device capable of seeing into the mind itself.

This screening device—and the inner photography it promised—was part of a larger complex of psychological inquiry that guided Mann's thinking. Preoccupied with fears of racial degeneration and mental derangement in the American national body, Mann believed his brand of phrenological physiology held the key to reform of (and through) education. Mann's understanding of bodily and mental upkeep guided not only his vision for education, but also provided his implicit rubric for assessing educational progress. He claimed that phrenology's luminaries

[Franz Joseph] Gall, [Johann] Spurzheim and [George] Combe have done for Metaphysics, or the science of mind, as great a work as [Francis] Bacon did for Physics, or the laws of matter. Already their labors are extensively appreciated; they are producing great improvements and ameliorations in penal jurisprudence and prison discipline, in the treatment of the insane, in ethical philosophy, and in *education, which lies at the bottom of all*,—subjects, which, as it seems to me, can never be properly understood but in the light of their science. (*A Few Thoughts...Man* 52, emphasis mine; see also Tomlinson 289-90)

That Mann is dreaming of the imminent adoption of a mental daguerreotype at the same time he waxes rhapsodic about the curative potential of phrenological intervention ought not surprise us: “Especially in the United States, the proliferation of photography and that of phrenology were quite coincident” (Sekula 12; also Barger and White 78-9). In the years leading up to Boston’s first city-wide written examinations, O. S. Fowler championed the manufacture of likenesses—painted on canvas, sculpted into stone, or better yet, cast in plaster of Paris—as the next-best alternative to saving the “cranium” itself, allowing future generations to “trace” their descent and “developments up to their fountain-*head*” (182, emphasis mine). When photography emerged as means of more cheaply generating durable and portable likenesses, the invention captured the imagination of America’s phrenological community—not least of which, O. S. Fowler and Mann.

By 1843, O. S. Fowler could be found characterizing the hereditary transmission of physical features in photographic terms, as though each generation was a picture of the same racial body: “every close observer ... will be struck with the wonderful minuteness of this transfer, as though both father and son and grand son, were daguerreotype likenesses struck from the same original at different times” (51). Indeed, American phrenologists like Fowler could claim to be early adopters of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s photographic apparatus, which they used to create portable reproductions of the heads of patients, inmates, philosophers, and statesman (see Prebel; Sekula). Photography enabled Fowlers and Wells Co. to expand their storefront business of phrenological readings to an empire of assessment-by-correspondence. Mailed to Fowler and Co. along with a small fee, daguerreotypes could be submitted to remote craniometric analysis and compared against the growing collection of other portraits—a catalogue of human types and capacities (“General Notices” 137; see also Horlick 24-25; cf.

Sekula). Fowlers and Wells Co. would send back a written appraisal of the daguerreotype they had received, a service they advertised as being a “mental daguerreotype,” capturing the mind in writing:

This spreads before yourself, friends, descendants, (and what would you not give for such a mental portrait of parents or ancestors?) every minute shading and ramification he [the examiner] descries; perpetuates every word of advice he utters, so that every perusal reimpreses it; fastens his answer, to all your questions; and furnishes, in black and white, fit for printing, a complete *mental* daguerreotype of yourself. (“General Notices” 137, emphasis in original)

Before long, Fowlers and Wells Co. were also selling pamphlets to the public on how to conduct an amateur phrenological examination on a photographed head. They titled this text *The Head and Face a Mirror of the Mind*—and in her 1872 diary, Mary Virginia Montgomery mentions sending for a copy, to further her phrenological self-education (Hermann 169).<sup>38</sup>

Offering a variant of this imagined correspondence between photograph-writing-mind, Mann’s “mental daguerreotype” was one composed by student writers themselves, not their examiners. Mann envisions written examination as similar to a photographic portrait, only with greater precision and depth. The skull might bound the upper limit of mental growth, but its measurements tell us little about how much actual mental development—facilitated by pedagogical inscription—has taken place. The scopic potential of written examination is that it visualizes what the traditional daguerreotype could only abstractly outline: the mental capacities and qualities beneath every bump and fold of the skull. Writing with ink enables an appraisal of what writing with light leaves in shadow. Why, though, did Mann believe writing to be so revealing—and what did he imagine it to reveal? These questions can be answered, in part, by recovering three elements of Mann’s assessment-rhetorical writing construct: His beliefs about *human nature*, *language*, and the role of *writing* in mediating the two. The rest of this chapter examines each in turn.

## **Making an Impression: Human Nature and the Racial Purposes of Schooling**

Knowingly or not, historians of education often discuss Mann as though he was alienated from, or oblivious to, the racial and colonial logics that saturated the politics of the early American republic—logics that hierarchically privileged whiteness, sacralized hereditary ability, and associated writing with both (see Tomlinson; also Saxton). Logics, in fact, that structure and suffuse Mann’s beliefs about human nature, and that inform his beliefs about the race-writing purposes of schooling and the scopic potential of writing assessment. Often, the content of Mann’s writings on human progress shade into eugenic musings on the ever-present danger of race degeneration. Consider: In his 1842 introduction to the fourth volume of the *Common School Journal*, Mann found himself bemoaning a modern world he considered too tolerant of, and hospitable to, human infirmity. Sheltered from the natural world and its hardships, unfit children were being born in ever-larger numbers and—what’s worse—were surviving to generate others of their kind. Mann longed for the return of a time when,

[a]mid hardship and exposure, the young were toughened or destroyed. Nature passed round among them, as a gardener among his plants, and weeded out the blasted and mildewed. She shook the tree, till the sickly fruits fell off. She did not preserve these, as the stock from which to produce the still more degraded fruits of a second season. But, under the modern hothouse system, the puny and feeble are saved. . . . By the various appliances of art, indeed, the stooping frame can be kept upright, and the shrunken be rounded out, into the semblance of humanity. (“Editor’s Introduction to Volume IV” 6)

Increasingly, nature was not permitted to do its benevolent work of supporting racial progress. The weak were neither strengthened by nature, nor were they allowed to perish quickly and mercifully by its hand. If the modern world was to blame for this dysgenic increase in infirmity, though, Mann held out hope that a different modern institution might provide a hygienic counterbalance. Mann’s moral convictions prevented him from advocating the forcible extermination of the weak (though, in fairness, it is an option he gave serious consideration).<sup>39</sup>



Instead, he saw great potential in the promotion of social spaces where all children could receive mental culture (that is, cultivation) and improvement.

Collective mental development might not, at once, put an end to the degeneration of the race, but Mann was optimistic that it might, at the least, offset it. Here was the true social importance of common schooling. Regress must be met with progress. The common school classroom was to take on the developmental burden that nature was no longer able to carry. Mann urges his *Common School Journal* readers to understand that the American future will be dismal or divine, depending on the quality of educational intervention its rising generation receives. Racial improvement was possible, but required intention and effort. “We ask all,” Mann implores, “to receive into their minds the great idea of social improvement, to contemplate, and strive to embody [sic] in human form, the sublime law of progression,—the possibility and the practicability of an ever-upward ascension in the scale of being. The race can be made happier and better than it is” (“Editor’s Introduction to Volume IV” 7).

Mann’s belief that education could actively promote race betterment was underwritten by his phrenological understanding that mental culture—and, by extension, racial health—was a product of bodily makeup and pedagogical conditioning. Mann tells us,

There are two ways of making the Mind more powerful. The first is by improving the bodily constitution, or physical organization of the race, so that, with more healthy bodies we may have stronger minds; and the second is, by giving all the skill and efficiency we can to such mind as there is; whether it be the miserable mind that belongs to a weak race, or the powerful mind that belongs to a strong one. The first is the work of Physiology; the second, of Education. (*Dedication* 59-60)

Mann’s construct of *race* extends from universal (*the* race) to particular (*a* race)—from the racial health of humanity as a gestalt to those individual groups that compose it. Innate mental differences fall along two intersecting axes: *inter-racial* (contrasting weak races and strong ones) and *intra-racial* (miserable and powerful minds, within a race). Education takes these axes of

inequality as its point of departure, cultivating “such mind as there is” for the purposes of race betterment—for both *a* race and *the* race. Pedagogical intervention provides “the grand machinery by which the ‘raw material’ of human nature can be worked up” and by which “embryos of talent may be quickened” (“Twelfth Report” 228)—developmental systems, in other words, by which racial progress and mental culture can be secured. “Almighty mind guides the universe,” Mann writes, “As to this earth, just in proportion to the development and culture of man’s intellect, he participates in that guidance;—knowledge enables him to lay his hand upon the great machinery which God has constructed, and to direct its movements for his own benefit” (*Dedication* 60). Management of the raw materials that constitute humanity, then, relies on two interoperating machineries—the inner machinery of nature, and the outer scientific machinery of education mapped to it, allowing intercession in and governance of the natural world.

Within this construct of mental development, the great “human drama” staged a conflict between internal nature and external government, pitting “mind trajecting itself forth, and seeking to do its will on whatever is external to itself” against “whatever is external to mind, modifying or resisting its movements” (“The Necessity of Education” 169). Developmental progress is mediated through this interaction. While Mann did not count himself a close follower of John Locke (see Tomlinson 274-275), he nevertheless endorsed a variation of the inscription model of mental growth Locke sets forth in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which “suppose[s] the mind to be ... *white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas*” (109, emphasis mine). Equating the act of learning to cumulative mental inscriptions, one’s mental character is contingent on *external* sense impressions that educate and over-write the mind’s original blankness, “for white paper receives any characters” (35). Mann inherits this line of thinking from Combe and other Lockean thinkers in the Common Sense Realist tradition, who

understood ideas as a kind of mental writing—an idea being “the impression (literally) sense data has made on the mind” (Berlin 7; see also Crowley, *Methodical*; Schuller; Tomlinson).

Mann, for his part, did not believe the mind void of *all* characters; children were pre-adapted to tendencies of behavior and thought as a matter of natural inheritance from their parents. Moreover, Mann subtly revised the Lockean image of the mind as “paper”—a dead, inert medium—opting instead for a more lively original substance: “Though born in ignorance, yet his [man’s] intellect is like an *ever-growing papyrus*, on whose leaves all knowledge may be written” (*A Few Thoughts...Man* 39, emphasis mine). Mann’s model of intellect—still shaped, in large part, by external inscription—is not passive, static, or entirely dependent on external input; the contours of the mind follow an internal course of development. The mind develops alongside the ever-growing body of knowledge impressed on its surface. Pedagogical inscription on the mind’s surface is needed not to galvanize mental growth, but to exercise and channel it—directing its course in a direction beneficial to the individual and to the race.

As an important system for formal, external governance of the mind, schooling participates in either exercising and expanding mental faculties, or in sponsoring their contraction and atrophy. As Mann puts it, “Intellectually, we can go backwards as well as forwards” (H. Mann, *A Few Thoughts...Man* 44). Disability results not only from parental inheritance, but can be written into student bodies and minds by improper instruction. Too easily, the classroom becomes yet another modern space productive (and permissive) of race deterioration and infirmity. Pedagogical insistence that children “sit straight and silent and motionless” in class, for instance, may physically “lead to dwarfishness” and “misdirect the action of the vital organs, which leads to deformity” (“Third Report” 55). These disabling physical effects have additional significant and dire effects on mental culture:

In regard to the intellect, it suppresses the activity of every faculty; and as it is a universal law in regard to them all, that they acquire strength by exercise, and lose tone and vigor by inaction, the inevitable consequence is, both to diminish the number of things they will be competent to do, and to disable them from doing this limited number so well as they otherwise might. (55)

Pedagogical reliance on fear of punishment might give the appearance of instructional success, but impress into student minds improper—that is, *lower*—motives for learning, leading not only to insubstantial intellectual growth but also to moral derangement. Owing to a phrenological belief that moral development was physiological in nature, Mann warns readers of the existence of the “moral paralytic” (“Special Preparation” 134) and the “child who is morally ... diseased” (136; see also Sekula 12). Education is never neutral where development is concerned: it either exacerbates these pathologies, or provides children a kind of moral prophylaxis.

Effective instruction was of the utmost racial importance. The disabling effects of mis- or under-exercising the faculties bring with them potentially lasting consequences. Describing the constitutional damage resulting when “[i]n the fallacious tranquillity [sic] of ignorance, ... unhealthful habits are formed,” Mann details a generational descent into madness, infirmity, and death, each generation compounding the weaknesses of their forbears:

as the inevitable consequence, debility or sickness ensues, ... feeble parents are succeeded by feebler children, the lineage dwindles and tapers from less to less, ... occasional contributions are sent off to deformity, to idiocy, and to insanity, until, sooner or later, after incredible sufferings, abused and outraged Nature, finding all her commandments broken, her admonitions unheeded, and her punishments contemned, applies to the offending family her sovereign remedy of extinction. (“Sixth Report” 168)

Even with modern society’s unfortunate permissiveness toward the unfit (as Mann thought of it), the order of nature can only be resisted so long. In fact, we are told that sustained moral and intellectual debasement—barbarisms common schooling is intended to countervail—is a root cause of disability and racial inferiority. Traced back to their origin, all infirmities stem from improper—and unhealthful—habits of mind and body. The degeneration of the race is self-

inflicted. Mann locates the source of human suffering and degeneration in a history of inadequate education, failures to heed the divine instructor's teachings: "Congenital blindness, deaf-mutism, hydrocephalus, insanity, idiocy, did these come normally, through law, or by reason of the most flagrant violations of law?" (*Dedication* 38).

Children can be read as the culmination and embodiment of the histories of conduct preceding their births—a synecdochic branch, the qualities of which tell the story of a larger family tree. Mann goes so far as to equate the figural child's body to a repository of hereditary disorders.

[A]s the number of ancestors doubles at each ascending remove,—two parents, four grand-parents, eight great grand-parents, and so onward,—there are, even at only the tenth degree, more than a thousand conduits of whose united streams each child is the *receptacle*; and how swollen with the feculence of all transmissible malignities, both of body and mind, must be his blood and brain. (H. Mann, *Dedication* 47)

Each child, then, exists as a kind of nosological archive—a living history of errors that common schooling endeavors to remediate. At the population-level, the stakes for this work are almost impossibly high; humanity's civilized future, at risk of being consumed by its dysgenic past: "our present world, compared with what it should be and what it might be, is but a Lazar-house of disease, and an Asylum for the Feeble-minded. The imbecile races of Italy and Spain, the half-grown millions of India and Mexico, like river-mouths, are only the *foul drainage of ancestral continents*, all gushing with fountains of debilitating and corrupting vices" (47; see also Tomlinson 292-293).

This framework for human inheritance and development left ample room for Mann to advance an inscription-based theory of white supremacy, tributary to a larger stream of race scientific thought coursing through 19<sup>th</sup>-century American thought: "a palimpsestic model of race before genetics, in which racial status indexes the impressions that accumulate over the life

span of individuals and the evolutionary time of races” (Schuller 12).<sup>40</sup> Fundamentally, Mann imagined racial differences as historical differences. The past is written in the body. It is with this understanding in mind that Mann informs us, “The contrasts among men result, not from the possession of a different number of original faculties, but from possessing the same faculties, in different proportions, and in different degrees of activity,” adding that, “The civilized men of the present day, have neither more nor less faculties, *in number*, than their barbarian ancestors had” (“Special Preparation” 107, emphasis in original). The difference between the civilized and the barbaric owes to their different histories of development. “Most ethnologists maintain,” Mann teaches, “that all the different races of men into which the human species is now divided came from the same Adam and Eve; and that all its varieties of Caucasian, Indian, African, Malayan, and so forth, are mere divergences from the same type, which, in the space of six thousand years, have wandered to such vast distances from each other, by force of climate and institutions” (*A Few Thoughts...Woman* 19). Physical and mental interventions (by “climate” and “institutions,” respectively) have, over the course of generations, led the races to wander from their original design.

In a pointed illustration of this logic, Mann offers a dystopian portrait of the mental stasis he believes suffered by the Chinese—his favorite foil for the progressive race he aspires to compose in the United States. “Why,” Mann asks, “are the Chinese, for a hundred successive generations, *transcripts* and *fac-similes* of each other, as though the dead grandparent had come back again in the grandchild, and so round and round?” (“The Necessity of Education” 169, emphasis mine). Not pausing for his audience’s answer, he continues,

It is because, among the Chinese, this external force [despotism] overlays the growing faculties of the soul, and compels them, as they grow, to assume a *prescribed* shape. . . . By their education, laws, and penalties, the minds of the people are made to grow into certain social, political, and religious forms, just as certainly, and on the same principle of

force, as the feet of their beauties are made, by small, inelastic shoes, to grow hoof-wise. (169, emphasis mine; see also Colbert 272)

Within Mann's orientalist imaginary, governmental strictures bind and distort the Chinese mind, rendering it—by analogy to the “*hoof-wise*” feet imposed on their “beauties”—both more feeble and bestial. At the same time, the vividness of Mann's imagery should not prevent us from observing that Mann describes mental governance explicitly as a form of race-writing.

Intergenerational sameness is *transcription*—a writing across bodies, identical in their conduct and customs. Education *pre*-scribes the mind, dictating—indeed, *writing*—who we are to be. The health of the race depends on how the mind is composed. Education—as a kind of external government of the mind—makes all the difference.

Mann is at pains throughout his writing to warn that the white race—indeed, all of humanity—is capable of degeneration, decline, and extinction. It is only through natural self-mastery that Mann views the race as salvageable, cautioning that “[w]ithout both natural and mental resources, such as can alone come from a knowledge of those laws which God has inwrought into the frame of nature and of ourselves, and without some good degree of obedience to them also, the whole human race would have to be abandoned, in commercial phrase, as a total loss” (*Dedication* 81). Happily, Mann assures us, education reform affords precisely the instruments necessary for staving off racial disaster. That is to say, if hygiene and inheritance conform to the divinely written laws of nature, then their invisible, private workings can be made *visible* by phrenological science, and then *public* by common school curricula—which Mann hoped would propagandize eugenic understandings of hygiene and reproductive health.

Indeed, when not moralizing about the natural and just extermination of those he deems unfit, Mann occasions to recommend selective breeding to hasten nature's eliminative work, professing that “until men shall have reference, in their matrimonial connections, to the physical

laws of hereditary descent, they have no right to call themselves civilized or Christian, in their treatment of the body” (*Dedication* 90). In the last chapter of this dissertation, we will return to Mann’s beliefs about sex and racial hygiene, which play a defining role in his beliefs about writing assessment in the college classroom. For our purposes here, it is enough for us to note Mann’s belief that education greased the wheels of hereditary progress by preparing the race to maintain a eugenic reproductive order: “A knowledge of this science [physiology]... would demonstrate the unspeakable folly and guilt of those matrimonial alliances where hereditary disease, and even insanity itself, are wedded, and the health, mind, and happiness of a family of children are sacrificed for the mercenary object of a dowry,” Mann tells readers (“Twelfth Report” 241). Yet while education can diffuse physiological knowledge (and breeding tips), and encourage appropriate exercise of body and mind, the blow these strike against habitual/hereditary disorders in a single generation is not sufficient to end them outright. Common schooling—and the knowledge and exercise it secures—must be sustained, gradually remediating the race, recuperating from and fortifying against the history of lassitude cascading across generations. We purchase a future for the race at the price of incrementally *overwriting* and of *writing off* those believed to degrade it—a price Mann, at times, seems enthusiastic to pay.

### **Molding the Mind: The Developmental Significance of Language**

Given Mann’s insistence that education is tantamount to mental inscription, it is perhaps understandable that he reserved a special place in his reform program for language and literacy. The white habitus to be sponsored by his brand of writing education was pointedly an English-language habitus, intended to inculcate “English” (read: white, *Enlightened*) habits of mind.



Language was imagined to facilitate and embody thought, shaping and externalizing the mind. Linguistic training provided a means of race-writing mental exercise; linguistic performance, a means of assessing mental development. A student of the Scottish Enlightenment, Mann follows thinkers like Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, and Hugh Blair in considering language to be the defining characteristic that separates human from beast.<sup>41</sup> He writes, “There is a faculty, or a set of faculties, whose express function it is to recognize and employ signs. Without such a power mankind would always have been mere animals; if bereft of it now, they would immediately degenerate into mere animals” (H. Mann, *Lecture on the Best* 18). Mann’s Examining Committee confidante Samuel Gridley Howe shared this expansive developmental understanding of language, identifying it as “an instrument by which intellect sharpens intellect; by which every mental faculty is strengthened and improved, while it is improving others” (*Thoughts* 46). Cultivation of students’ language faculties were, for these reasons, believed indispensable to their overall mental cultivation. The race’s decline is threatened in every slip of the tongue—or the pen. Writing assessment was intended to measure this decline and provide multiple means for reversing it.

In his second *Annual Report*, Mann admonishes readers not to underestimate the importance of language. Humanity’s past, present, and future—the world surrounding us, the world within us—all are underwritten by words, so to speak: “Language is not merely a necessary instrument of civilization, past or prospective, but it is an indispensable condition of our existence as rational beings. We are accustomed to speak with admiration of those assemblages of things, we call the necessities, the comforts, the blessings of life, without thinking that *language is a pre-necessary to them all*” (“Second Report” 510, emphasis mine). Participation in the progressive, humanizing promise of language—“the highest attribute of

human greatness”—requires both an intelligent grasp of words, and also the precision of thought necessary to compose and order them appropriately. Without literate engagement of this kind, language’s public dimension—and, therefore, its progressive value—is jeopardized. For this reason, Mann “[d]eem[s] the mode, and the degree of success found to attend it, of teaching our children the orthography and significance of their mother-tongue, to be the most important question which could be put in regard to their intellectual culture” (507).

Language, as Mann theorized it, enjoyed its status as humanity’s intellectual keystone not only because it facilitated communication in the present, but also because it enabled communion with the past and projection into potential futures. Put differently, language is an instrument not just of civilization, but of history. “Without language,” Mann reminds us, “our own memory dates the beginning of time, and the record of our own momentary existence contains all that we can know of universal history” (“Second Report” 512). Linguistic faculties are *de facto* historical faculties, pre-necessary to the kind of mental inscription that pedagogy provides and racial progress requires. Absent language, the ever-growing papyrus sustains no impressions, its leaves permanently innocent of knowledge. Mann describes language as a kind of mental prosthetic, extending or superseding the senses, writing that “we may acquire a knowledge of a very few things,—such as are placed within the range of our senses,—without the use of language; but that language is the only medium by which any thing, prior to our own memory and experience, or beyond our own vision, can be made known to us” (532-3). Language confers ability, compensating for our sensory limitations and deficiencies; without its aid, memory collapses on itself and the potential historical consciousness falls away. The hand slips from the great machinery God has created.

For Mann, the transcendent, humanizing promise of language is intimately bound up in ideas of racial history and culture. It is only through language that racial continuity and consciousness become possible. Language preserves the genealogical past in an amber of words, such that “with language, antiquity re-lives; we are spectators at the world’s creation; we are present with our first progenitors, when the glory of a new life beamed from their inanimate frames; the long train of historic events passes in review before us,” Mann writes (“Second Report” 512). Placing collective history within our intellectual reach, language also—in Mann’s account—makes visible the need for eugenic intervention:

we behold the multiplication and expansion of our race, from individuals to nations, from patriarchs to dynasties; we see their temporal vicissitudes and moral transformations; the billowy rise and fall of empires; the subsidence of races, whose power and numbers once overshadowed the earth; [and] the emergence of feeble and despised tribes into wide-extended domination ... —all, in fine, which has been done and suffered by our kindred nature.... (512)

While language situates its users in racial time by recording the past—funding narratives of hereditary and collective continuity—it also, on a subterranean level, embodies a kind of collective racial mind that usage enables participation in. In a way, language endures as “[w]hat civilizations and peoples leave us as the monuments of their thought” (Foucault, *Order* 87), not only in the sense that language records the accumulated knowledge and literature of a people, but also in that “language forms the locus of tradition, of the unspoken *habits of thought*, of what lies hidden in a people’s mind; it accumulates an ineluctable memory which does not even know itself as memory” (297, emphasis mine). Encoded with the memory and habits of thought of a people, languages facilitate (or constrain) intellectual progress, disciplining the minds of their users to come into closer conformity with the collective culture of the race.

This relationship represents a special case of the more general connection Mann describes between external government to inner mental development. In the course of discussing the habits of language that students develop in school, Mann reminds readers that

language re-acts upon the mind that uses it. It is like the garments in which some nations clothe themselves, which shape the very limbs that draw them on. Men are generally very willing to modify or change their opinions or views, while they exist in thought merely, but when once formally expressed, the language chosen often becomes the mould of the opinion. The opinion fills mould, but cannot break it and assume a new form. Thus errors of thought and life originate in impotence of language. (“Second Report” 515)

Imposing a kind of upper limit on mental culture—not unlike the constraint the skull imposes on the brain—language bounds possibilities for thought and expression. In what is, perhaps, a sly nod to the double-meaning of *habit* as both custom and costume, Mann imagines language as an attire that multiply fashions the body, suiting it to-and-through culture. Just as the frame of the body is, in Mann’s developmentalist account, “moulded” by dress, the frame of the mind conforms to language—outfitted with its logics and knowledges, vested with its inelegancies and errors.

Pointedly, Boston’s common schools did not teach “language” in the abstract. Mann was convinced there were special developmental reasons for students to learn the *English* mother tongue. The writing construct he imagined was, more accurately, an English-language writing construct. Amy Zenger reminds us that the fetish for English-language education in the United States has roots that extend back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century “mother tongue ideology,” which posited “English as the language of ‘adult civilization’ and ... perceived language an indicator of race” (332). “The mother tongue,” Zenger explains, “functions to bond its speakers into a distinct community across geographical boundaries; it also unites its speakers across time, connecting living speech with history” (335). Mann would add that use of a superior language inducts speakers into superior habits of mind, thereby exercising and racially improving them.

During his tenure as *Common School Journal* editor, he hand-picked and republished an excerpt from Charles E. Trevelyan's *On the Education of the People of India*, expounding the supremacy of the English language for the edification of his journal's readership. Extolling the exceptionalism of English in distinctly colonial terms, this begins: "As of all existing languages and literatures, the English is most replete with benefit to the human race, so it is overspreading the earth with a rapidity far exceeding any other" ("English Language" 80). Ensclosed in the manifest destiny of English is what Robert Phillipson has called a "native speaker's burden"—an imperative to linguistically ennoble those imprisoned in mental childhood by the impotence of their tongues. It is with paternalistic pride that Trevelyan notes,

In the West India Islands we have given *our language* to a population collected from various parts of Africa; and *by this circumstance alone* they have been brought many centuries nearer civilization than their countrymen in Africa, who may for ages grope about in the dark, destitute of any means of acquiring true religion and science. . . . More recently the English language has taken root in the continent of Africa itself, and *a nation is rising by means of it*, in the extensive territory belonging to the Cape, out of a curious mixture of different races. ("English Language" 80, emphasis mine)

The gift of English outfits its recipients with a more capacious linguistic garmenture within which the mind can grow; chasms in developmental time are closed in proportion to the extent English mediates the *vox populi*.

In his own writings, Mann returns to this connection between linguistic and racial progress regularly and explicitly. He identifies as a hallmark of despised "savage nations" that they lack "a *highly cultivated language*, with the general ability to read and write it" ("Necessity of Education" 168, emphasis mine), and he credits language with determining scientific progress in terms dripping with linguistic chauvinism: "It is well known that science itself, among scientific men, can never advance far beyond a scientific language in which to record its laws and principles. *An unscientific language, like the Chinese, will keep a people unscientific forever.*

So the knowledge of a people on any subject cannot far exceed the compass of the language which they fully comprehend” (H. Mann, “Second Report” 514-5, emphasis mine). Some languages, Mann remarks, provide a stronger pedagogical catalyst, more rapidly and effectively cultivating the mind: “Knowledge is communicated and acquired indefinitely *better* and *faster* in one way than in another;—through such a language as the English, than through such a language as the Chinese” (*Dedication* 74). If Chinese is the language of stasis, hobbling users through its impotence, English is—Mann insists—a language of progress, mastery of which confers mental growth and power.

As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, the spectral other haunting Mann’s race-writing dreams was not the unlettered savage, but the *mindless automaton*, mechanically processing instruction—another face for the *polished imbecile*, bearing the outer appearance (but not inner substance) of mental culture. As early as his first *Annual Report* as Massachusetts’s Education Secretary in 1837, Mann expressed his fear that students “may attend school for the allotted period, merely as so many male and female *automata*, between four and sixteen years of age” (“First Report” 410). Mann is acutely aware that compliance in the classroom is, by itself, neither generative nor indicative of mental exercise; rote memorization might give the impression of learning, where only superficial mental inscriptions had been made. Students may robotically process and regurgitate signs without engaging with, or being developed by, their inner content—something we return to in the next chapter. Observing classrooms with this danger in mind, Mann finds that there is an “obvious want of intelligence” that can be *read* in the bodies of students as they read: “With some exceptions, I regret to say, that the eyes, features, and motions of the readers have indicated only bodily sensations, not mental activity” (“Second Report” 506).

Reading, devoid of intelligence, provides no developmental benefit to the reader, and may even dull the mind—diminishing the race through mental disuse. The threat of automatism is that it enables, even spreads degeneration, all while masking mental decline beneath a veneer of outward proficiency. To illustrate how mental deficiency can cohabit with apparent linguistic competence, Mann provides the cautionary example of the Cretin. In an ethnological voice, Mann proclaims that,

The gorges and marshy places in the Alps and Pyrenees produce a race of idiots, known, technically, by the name of *Cretins*. These beings are divided by physiologists into three classes. The Cretins of the first degree are mere blank idiots. But the Cretins of the third degree have great facility in acquiring languages. They can be taught so as to translate the words of one language into those of another, though without the slightest comprehension of the meaning of either; and what is more remarkable, they will, so far as the rhyme is concerned, make good poetry. (“Words, Words, Words” 181-182, emphasis in original)

Mann intends the Cretin as a cautionary reflection of the inner idiocy lurking behind the mechanically correct performance of American students. “If words are taught to children for years,” Mann asks, “during the most active part of their life, without any of the ideas they are intended to convey, ought we to be surprised, if much of our public speaking and popular literature should be the production of Cretins of the third degree?” (181).

The foundational habit of mind that schools need to instill in students—indeed, what Mann considers “the only foundation of intellectual greatness” (“Twelfth Report” 526)—is the association of arbitrary words with the substantial things they signify, such that the heavy meaning of those words always weighs on and strengthens the mind. “In reading, the page should be only as the mirror, or picture, through which objects are beheld” (524), but as Mann confides, students are too often obligated to stare at what is, for them, no more than “the outer darkness of a Chinese Manuscript” (525). “I have often found that the black and white pages of the book was the outer boundary of the reader’s thoughts, and a barrier to arrest their progress,

instead of being a vehicle to carry them onward or upward into whatever region the author might have expatiated,” he agonizes (507). This dangerous automatism, seemingly invisible to teachers, becomes all too visible when they examine students carefully and closely—yet too often, “[t]he children’s minds are not looked into, to see what new operations they can accurately perform” (509, emphasis mine).

Written examination emerges as a response to this failure, a reform poised to expose and remediate the mechanical mind. But the benefits of written examination were not, as existing assessment scholarship has suggested, limited to the modal benefits of writing as a more durable medium for expert inspection. His theory of writing, recovered for the first time below, positions written inscription as a potent method of race-writing: writing assessment mattered because writing materially altered the mind in special, measurable ways.

### **Composition as Mental Measurement: Materializing and Mediating Progress**

Perhaps because they are not neatly collected in a single treatise, Mann’s beliefs about *writing* itself have all but totally escaped historians’ critical notice (cf. Crain; Witte, Trachsel, and Walters)—so much so that some scholars have interjected doubt regarding whether the 1845 examinations can be called “the beginning of writing assessment” as such (Huot, O’Neill, and Moore 496). Brian Huot, Peggy O’Neill, and Cindy Moore counsel that “[t]he Chinese had written examinations over a thousand years ago. In 1840 [sic] Horace Mann called for written tests to replace oral examinations in the Boston schools. We could argue, though, that these were written exams but not really a test of writing per se” (496). The Sinophobic Mann would likely blanch to find the 1845 examinations described as spiritually continuous with ancient Chinese bureaucracy. Setting this irony aside, “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” makes amply



clear that writing was both the mode of the 1845 examinations *and* a subject tested by them. This section considers how Mann's daguerreotype likeness of the mind represents not just *written* examination but *writing* examination; it also takes up what is perhaps a weightier question, investigating what Mann believed to be the assessment-rhetorical relationship between writing, mental culture, and intellectual ability. Setting aside formal examinations by state auditors, did Mann consider the broader importance of *classroom* writing instruction and assessment?

When we reconstruct Mann's theory of composition from his scattered writings on the topic, what we learn is that Mann acclaimed the act of writing as being uniquely positioned to convert language use into race-writing exercise. He theorized *composition* as a complex feat of mental measurement, in which the writer appraised the world around her, and transformed that world into words—at least, to the best of her ability. Such a task was demanding; undertaking it—even with limited success—could strengthen the mental faculties in remarkable ways. Mann was, after all, a devotee of faculty psychology and its doctrines of mental discipline. As a daguerreotype likeness of the mind, writing could be audited by an instructor, and used to determine where their mental operations were ill-measured or mindlessly mechanical—and cultivate them accordingly.

Mann's construct of writing occupied this space where mental measurement of one kind facilitates mental measurement of another: Read someone's writings and you will get a sense for their mental power and racial worth. And, in keeping with his beliefs about language bounding mental development, Mann militated against those he thought of as "word-men," merely repeating words in writing without mastering and measuring them. Racial progress required preventing the nation of the coming age from being populated by these *word-men*—another

mask for the “polished imbecile” or the “third-degree Cretin” who stalks the pages of Mann’s extant works.

One reason Mann’s assessment-rhetorical construct of writing has escaped sustained critical scrutiny may be that the writing-related terms in use at the time had different technical meanings than they often do now. The 1845 examinations were administered at “Writing Schools” and at “Grammar Schools”—which were, in fact, two separate departments at the same physical school. The Writing department managed instruction in “Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Writing, and Bookkeeping” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 338), while the Grammar department held dominion over “Astronomy, ... Natural Philosophy, ... History; Geography, English Grammar, and Definitions” (291). When the Writing School Examining Committee administered their subject test in “Writing,” they understood this term to mean *handwriting* or “chirography,” the art which “embraces the mechanical formation of letters in writing a coarse or a fine, a plain or an ornamental hand” (H. Mann, “Boston” 348).

“Grammar,” by contrast, was tested by the Grammar School Examining Committee as the larger art of selecting and arranging words. And on the “Grammar” subtest and all other subtests, the Grammar School Committee did more than mark answers correct, incorrect, or unanswered—they also assiduously documented three kinds of errors in writing—spelling, capitalization, and grammar. (The “Grammar” subtest, then, tested grammar twice-over, appraising knowledge of grammar, as well as whether students could compose that knowledge on the page with grammatical precision—something we return to in the next chapter.) In his editorial conclusion to “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” Mann announces the features of writing appraised by the Grammar School Committee as providing the rudimentary basis for *composition*, a term he treated as synonymous with the generation of *written language*:

Spelling, punctuation, the proper capitalizing of letters, with the construction of sentences, come under the head of Written Language. As soon as a child can write legibly, he should be put to writing simple sentences from memory, or from dictation; and, as a part of this exercise, he should be taught spelling, syllabication, punctuation, the rules for capitalizing both prose and poetry, etc. (“Boston” 348).

This act of writing from memory is, as we see below, what Mann took to be the rhetorical fountainhead from which composition springs.

Mann and his examiner colleagues expressed remorse that written language (i.e., composition) was treated as a separate subject from writing (i.e., handwriting), with each taught, as a rule, by separate school masters (namely, the “Grammar” master and the “Writing” master). When the results of the 1845 examinations revealed widespread mistakes in written language, this crew of reformers pointed to the separation of schools into Grammar and Writing departments as partly to blame for student failure. Speaking for himself and his subordinate Examining Committees, Mann declares,

In composition, the elegance, or, at least, the legibility of the hand-writing should be regarded; and in hand-writing, it is a wicked waste of time to confine children, year after year, to copy-books. ... It is evident from an inspection of these [student answers] that the kindred exercises in *hand-writing* and in *written language* had not been properly combined *in one exercise*. Had this been so, the errors in grammar, in punctuation and in spelling, would not have amounted to thousands and tens of thousands, in the answers of only five hundred children” (“Boston” 348, emphasis in original).

They yearned for a day when instruction in written language and handwriting was unified—an early conception of “a composition made whole” (cf. Shipka). The solution they posed to this problem is one of the key recommendations presented by Mann and his colleagues: that Boston’s Grammar and Writing Schools be combined under the superintendence of one school master, with the subject matters for these schools integrated to enable deeper disciplinary engagement and increased mental culture.

Integrating hand-writing with written language would, Mann hoped, help to eradicate aesthetic imperfections in bodies of writing: “Whoever is responsible for the whole instruction of a child, in both hand-writing and language, . . . will not accept of beautiful hand-writing, *deformed* by errors in spelling, &c.; nor will he accept of correct spelling, in a hand with difficulty legible. Being interested in all, he will, at the same time, aim at *perfection* in all” (“Boston” 348). This eugenic fixation on “deformity” in writing was not merely a cosmetic preference. It was central to the race-writing purpose of the written examinations themselves: reading the mental physiognomy of students and documenting mental blemishes in every written blunder detected. Errors, once identified, could be eradicated; the mind, where underdeveloped, could be prodded to exercise its way to health and hygiene.

To contextualize this framing of written language, we can broaden our critical aperture to include Mann’s other writings on the topic, penned in the years leading up to and following the 1845 examinations—writings that flesh out his theory of composition. Early in his tenure as Massachusetts’s Secretary of Education, Mann was a forceful advocate of instruction in composition, which he acknowledged was fast becoming a necessity for participation in the American public. Accordingly, composition was emerging as a curricular staple of that most Republican of institutions, the common school. Improvement of the race of children, it seems, necessitated improvement of their facility with written communication. “The ability to express ideas in writing, with vigor and perspicuity,” Mann notes, “is now deemed so valuable, that, in many places, Composition has been added to the list of Common-school studies” (“Third Report” 49).

Anticipating by over a century Walter Ong’s casting of writing as a technology of thought, Mann discusses “that beautiful and wonderful instrument,—a written language” (A

*Lecture on the Best* 34) as a kind of precondition for the full flourishing of *creative*, rather than *transcriptive*, intellect. Writing makes possible the distillation and management of thought. Without symbolic externalization of language, we are unable to see our minds mirrored on the page; we are unable, that is, to take the full measure of our own ideas. By contrast, materializing thought through writing provides opportunities for disciplining the mind—for gaining a rational self-mastery Mann felt otherwise impossible. He argued, “no man ever comprehends his own views clearly and definitely, or ever avails himself of all the resources of his own mind, until he reduces his thoughts to writing, or embodies them in some visible, objective form” (“Special Preparation” 93). In this way, writing ability marks the threshold for entering full humanity, and the precondition for full intellectual expression. Words serve as rhetorical instruments for the mind to map, weigh, and appraise the constituent elements of life—arresting the world in what Mann calls the “picture-words” of the English mother-tongue (“Second Report” 555).

Mann describes this mental measurement process as the *sine qua non* of full linguistic participation, writing that,

All *true* use of language ... necessarily involves *a mental act of adjustment, measure, precision, pertinency*; otherwise, it cannot fix the extent or gauge the depth of any subject. Language is to be selected and applied to the subject-matter, whether that subject-matter be business, history, art or consciousness, just as a surveyor applies his chain to the measurement of areas, or as an artist selects his colors to portray the original. (“Second Report” 534, emphasis mine)

Business, history, art—the disciplinary matter at hand amounts to less than does the habit of mind, mental measurement, common to them all. Measurement of this kind is missing in the automata that menace Mann’s linguistic utopia. Speech or writing without mental measurement is little more than sound or scribbling. An internal grasp of the meanings of words is required of any true use of language: “If the thing signified is not present to the mind, it is impossible that the language should be a measure, for, by the supposition, *there is nothing to be measured*” (535,

emphasis mine). Correspondingly, the use of words without mental measurement provides the mind no exercise, conferring no developmental value—only polished imbecility. “Words are but purses; things, the shining coin within them,” Mann explains (“Means and Objects” 71).

Hollowed of their meanings, words leave students mentally and developmentally bankrupt.

Mann relates this mental impoverishment as a failure of measurement in terms of civilizational underdevelopment and disability. Schooling in mindful communication ushers students forward in the march of civilization, “prepar[ing] children for resembling the philosopher, rather than the *savage*,” to the extent that “[t]he school is the place to form a habit of observing distinctions between words and phrases, and of adjusting the language used to various extents of meaning. It is the place where they are to commence the great art of adapting words to ideas and feelings, just as we apply a measuring instrument to objects to be measured” (“Second Report” 513-514, emphasis mine). Herein lies the importance of active, mind-exercising reading for mental development, for “[s]uch reading *creates ability*, while it communicates knowledge. The greatest accumulation of facts, until the comparing and the foreseeing faculties have acted upon them, is as useless as a telescope or a watch would be in the hands of a savage” (“Third Report” 20).

If this great art of measurement—adapting words to ideas and feelings—separates philosopher from savage, it can also be counted as saving students from disabling cognitive atrophy, inasmuch as mental power, when unexercised, “at length withers away like a palsied limb” (21; see also Tomlinson 249-50). Yet unintelligent *writing* is no less an intellectual blight than unintelligent reading. Few habits of mind are as self-destructive as the tendency to inscribe words without engaging with—or being exercised by—their inner significance. Such unthinking automatism in writing desolates the mind: “When the habit is confirmed, of relying on the verbal

faculty, the rest of the mind dies out. The dogma taught by Aristotle, that Nature abhors a vacuum, is experimentally refuted” (“Means and Objects” 72). Allowing the automaton-writer one pyrrhic victory over mental ruin, Mann confides, “I know of but one compensation for these word-men; I believe they never become insane. *Insanity requires some mind for a basis*” (72, emphasis mine). The one irreplaceable condition of progress is *mind*. Without it—without intelligent management of society and nature—the race stagnates and degenerates. A nation of word-men is a nation without a future.

Enter composition. Against the bleak portrait of automaton-writer, the composer emerges in Mann’s work as a progressive alternative. Composition, as Mann understands it, bears three interlocking affordances that promote mental culture and support the education-led “march of universal improvement” (*Two Lectures* 11): *composition* deserving of that name a) requires intelligent mental measurement and, for this reason, b) displays on paper and exercises the mental faculties at work in this supremely human feat of measurement, all while c) providing a means of recalibrating mental measurement, intervening in the mind by intervening on the page. All in all, assessment of classroom composition lends itself to the kind of race-writing work at the core of Mann’s agenda.

Taking these affordances one by one, we first find that writing ability can be bought only with the “shining coin” of Mann’s linguistic realm: mental mastery over the things indexed by words. Gesturing to the futility of attempting to compose without first mastering the meanings of words, Mann asks,

When they [students] would compose, of what service, then, are those columns of spelling-book words, which they have committed to memory by the furlong? Where then, too, are the rich mines of thought contained in their Readers, their First-Class Books, and their little libraries? These they have been accustomed to consider merely as instruments, to practise pronunciation, emphasis, and cadence, upon. They have moved, for years, in the midst of ideas, *like blind men in picture-galleries*. Hence they have no knowledge of

things, and their relations; and, *when called upon for composition, they have nothing to compound*. But, as the outward and visible sign of composition is a sheet-full of words, a sheet is filled, though more from the dictionary than from the head. (“Means and Objects” 71-2, emphasis mine)

The automaton-writer may be able to pour forth words, masquerading behind the outward and visible sign of expressive performance, but she engages in activity more akin to transcription than creation. What is needed, to distinguish automata from composers, is an instrument capable of detecting whether responses derive from the dictionary or the head. In the next chapter, we will encounter how the 1845 written examinations represented Mann’s attempt to pilot such an instrument, its questions exposing which students were no more than superficially taught—their words, no more than empty purses. Exposure of this kind made it clear, Mann believed, that too many students were wandering through the world of ideas, blind to their surroundings—their minds vacant and unexercised, in danger of shriveling like palsied limbs.

The exercise provided by thoughtful composition prevented this mental atrophy. Mental measurement of the order required by composition served an important prophylactic function for the new race: To compose on the page was to preserve the mind against disuse and degeneration. It provided also a medium through which the mind could be corrected, its measurements refined and recalibrated. Mann considered this opportunity for correction to be a gift given by language use, telling us of classroom questioning that, “The ideas of the learner are to be brought out, and set, objectively, before his own eyes, *like a picture*. Any *error* can then be pointed out. The boundary-line can be traced between his knowledge and his ignorance” (“Second Report” 553, emphasis mine). Placed within its proper pedagogical frame, all linguistic exchanges can be thought of as mental daguerreotypes—pictures of the mind’s operations and powers that, externalized for expert scrutiny, enable identification and correction of mental imperfections.



To facilitate this process of mental remediation, Mann urges us to “[a]t the earliest practicable period, let composition or translation be commenced” (“Second Report” 554-5).

Recalibration of the mind is to proceed from objects of natural interest to children, rather than abstract matters developmentally and experientially out of reach. “By composition,” he clarifies,

I do not mean an essay “On Friendship,” or “On Honor;” nor that a young Miss of twelve years should write a homily “On the duties of a Queen,” or a lad, impatient of his nonage, “On the shortness of human life;”—but that the learner should apply, on familiar subjects, the language he thinks best, to the ideas and emotions he perceives clearest and feels strongest, *to see how well he can make them fit each other*,—first in sentences, or short paragraphs, then in more extended productions. (555, emphasis in original)

Themes for composition are to be selected from the realm of those things most familiar to the young composer—those things most likely to elicit true engagement, authentic measurement, and thus genuine mental exercise. Topics beyond this scope encourage students to enlist the aid of words the meanings of which they fail to fully grasp; they over-exercise the verbal faculty, parroting rather than measuring words, while the mind dies out. Appropriately scaffolded, writing instruction and assessment could habituate students to a greater level of verbal hygiene, affording them the guidance necessary for mental remediation and culture.

By prompting students to compose, externalizing their minds on paper, the teachers supplied themselves with technology needed to see into students’ heads, diagnose their mental maladies, and operate on them with a degree of sophistication Mann describes in surgical terms: “If the pupil’s knowledge outruns his language,—as is often the case with the most promising,—then a more copious diction is to be sought; but if language overgrows ideas, it is to be reduced, though it be by *knife* and *cautery*” (“Second Report” 555, emphasis mine). The pedagogue’s pen, a scalpel to scale away the cancerous growth of content-less words—marks on the page, a means of managing and mending malformed faculties. All of which sets the table for writing assessment: Mann’s phrenological writing construct connects composition to mental

measurement in two distinct (yet interconnected) ways. The act of composition is educationally important because it requires feats of mental measurement, exercising the mind in the process. A text, once composed, then becomes a subject for measuring the mind that composed it—or, rather, engaging in a second-order measurement, appraising and judging where students' mental measurements were apt or were wide of the mark. Assessment of student writing is the measurement of mental measurement, determining where language fell short of the ideas needing to be expressed, or where language outstrips or “overgrows” ideas—the overactive verbal faculty saying much but expressing little.

As constructed by Mann, literacy is at core an ability to physically recognize, measure, and outwardly redeploy signs, and it is the charge of schools to habituate students in this process. Classroom writing instruction and assessment is essential to individual and collective progress—for linguistic participation in racial history, for race-writing the individual student's mind, and for securing progressive momentum for the race as a whole. Were we to abstract Mann's writing construct from his race-writing agenda and phrenological worldview, we would evacuate the 1845 written examinations of most of their local meanings, consequences, and legacies—leaving them so thin on significance that they might easily slip through the cracks of our historical memory. On the surface, these examinations might appear little more than a series of short answer questions, assessed primarily in terms of their mechanical correctness. Viewed with an attention only to the examination's generic construct of writing, it becomes possible to conclude that the primary danger of the 1845 examinations is that they fail to appraise “writing” expansively enough. As the next two chapters will argue, such a conclusion is untenable. If Mann's theory of composition is any indication, the moral stakes and significance of a writing assessment may depend less on what is assessed as representing “writing” than on what

“writing” is taken to represent about writers. As we begin to rewrite the history of the field with an attention to social justice, the critical attention we pay to the writing construct will be enriched by a corresponding attention to the ecologies of meaning that writing is imagined to participate in, and the worlds it is imagined to help *construct*.

## CHAPTER 3

### Scoring the New Race:

#### Error, Assessment Reporting, and Accountability in the Common School

*Enumeration demands kinds of things or people to count. Counting is hungry for categories. Many of the categories we now use to describe people are by products of the needs of enumeration. (Hacking “Biopower” 280)*

Horace Mann counted on the idea that America was exceptional. The United States was more than an experiment in government and liberty—its settler colonial origins marked the dawn of a new day for racial self-management and progress. “In many respects,” Mann wrote, “the colonization of New England was like a *new creation of the race*” (“Seventh Report” 410, emphasis mine). By abandoning the Old World and its tired, its poor, its degenerating masses, these “ancestors” had secured a new beginning of sorts, unencumbered by the most dysgenic segments of the population, and liberated from traditions and institutions of inferior culture. Mann crowed that, “This transference [sic] of the fortunes of our race from the Old to the New World was a gain to humanity of at least a thousand years. ... What mighty obstructions and hinderances to human progress did they leave behind them!” (412). This provisional break with the racial past doubled as a chance to more immediately and effectively redirect the racial future—a new race for a New World. America was, indeed, a land of opportunity.

Written examination emerges as an instrument for monitoring and managing the progress of the new American race. Mann believed that the existence of common schooling was necessary

for human improvement, but far from sufficient. Without meaningful public oversight, there was no guarantee that school masters would leave good inscriptions in their students' minds. In his first years as Education Secretary, Mann concluded that the state's common schools were failing to adequately support student development, thereby committing a grave injustice against the nation—jeopardizing its future. Better mental inscriptions were needed. Unable to directly reshape education through an Education Secretaryship “[i]nvested with no formal authority” (Tomlinson 241), Mann set out to reform Massachusetts' schools by opening up the closed world of classroom instruction to public perusal, the marks of his pen literally *character-izing* education: the schoolroom and its students, reproduced as ink on paper, reformable bodies in the thoughts of the citizen-public. To reform American education, Mann needed both a means of appraising the effects of classroom instruction and a mechanism for publicizing where schools were failing. Mann needed writing assessment.

Through the student writings collected by Mann's examiners, the public could be given a clear picture of the mental inscriptions made in each common school classroom—and could push for reform, as needed. In this way, writing assessment was, from its inception, imagined as a potent rhetorical technology—an available means for rectifying the social injustice of maleducation. Within this context, the assessment of writing doubled as an assessment-rhetoric of *accountability*: A new reform to support a new race, by making the student body newly countable. Returning to Mann's “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article and his private correspondences with Examining Committee members, this chapter cracks open the familiar historical case of the 1845 Boston school examinations, revealing layers of meaning that existing historiography has largely overlooked.<sup>42</sup>

While regularly cited in histories of writing assessment (e.g., Addison and McGee; Lynne; Williamson; Witte, Trachsel, and Walters) and of educational testing (e.g., Hanson; Madaus; Morris; Reese), the story of these 1845 examinations has often been told as a political one—a fight for control over instruction in Boston’s schools—without deep engagement to the *biopolitical* underpinnings of Mann’s accountability rhetoric. The common school, as Mann imagined it, was a space brimming with “biopower,” Michel Foucault’s word for the “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (*History* 140). As an instrument of biopower, writing assessment was introduced as a new way to audit this developmental machinery—counting its deficiencies and reporting them, so that the parties responsible for them could be held accountable.

Restoring to view this hidden history of writing assessment, this chapter guides us in re-examining the twin rhetorical dimensions of Mann’s new documentary technology: *inward reading* and *display*. In the sections to follow, I begin by reviewing the existing understandings of Mann’s assessment-based accountability rhetoric; then, I substantially revise these understandings through close, archival engagement with each of the core dimensions of Mann’s written examination technology. First, I explore what I call written examination’s *rhetoric of inward reading*. Mann and his reformer colleagues drew on assessment to (re)define the inner meaning of written performance, identifying student-made marks on the page with the “good or bad inscriptions” made by school masters on the “individual minds” of their charges—a pedagogical history translated from private mind to public paper (H. Mann, “Prospectus” 14-15). A consummate phrenologist, Mann was convinced that surfaces—whether the bumps of the skull or formal features of writing—told the deeper story of human development and worth. To see inner development in surface features was to use what he called “the inward eye.” To *assess* was,

in his vocabulary, to conduct an “inward reading.” As conceived by Mann, the rhetorical work of assessment was to count features of student writing, then interpretatively recount them to the public through score reporting that guides the public in inwardly reading the data collected through written examination. The score reporting work of “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” frames and explains assessment data to readers, linking that data with a chain of meanings that held school masters accountable for improving the racial health of students—accountable, that is, for what I have termed Mann’s aim of “race-writing” in the classroom (see Chapter 2).

Having inwardly read students’ development through their compositions, Mann’s examination technology supplied a visual aid for score reporting: an approach to *inwardly displaying the student body* in the form of data tables—the first of their kind in American education. The creation of tabular displays—or “tabularization,” as it was called by the Grammar School examiners (qtd. in Caldwell and Curtis 328; and Reese; 131)—introduced a new rhetorical instrument to the terrain of education in the United States: public, multimodal score reporting. And as William J. Reese has argued, this antebellum development—along with written examination and statistical error quantification—helped to shape schooling itself:

The nineteenth century acclimated many teachers, pupils, taxpayers, and administrators to a world where schools were expected to produce measurable results: hard facts, not impressions, about educational achievement. Statistics transformed how many people understood reality, and true believers ever since have reduced the purpose of public schools to whatever appears in a table, chart, or graph. (227)

These tabularizations—or tabular displays, as I will call them—also helped to rhetorically shape and reinforce claims and aims regarding the student body. They were, I argue, an instrument of phrenological assessment-rhetoric, visually recreating the workings of the inward eye for the public eye, translating for a lay audience what the phrenological expert saw in Boston’s schools:

bodies of error. The accounting of Boston's common school student bodies amounts to no less than a quantitative rhetoric of display—numerically reconstituting the student body in order to expose comparative inferiorities and exteriorize collective underdevelopment. And to do so in a way that located accountability for student error—directing the public's ire by isolating the school masters most responsible for miseducating and under-developing Boston's common school students. This early data-driven effort to shame and subordinate teachers “reflects a faith in the inviolability of statistics and quantitative measures and the twined assumption present at the birth of the testing movement: that teachers are primarily responsible for children's academic performance” (Reese 229). Crucially, the 1845 reformers' quantitative displays of the student body were calculated as a sentimental public appeal. Quantification enters the story of writing assessment not as a logical but an affective instrument—the number, imagined as a source of sympathy, poignance, and racial meaning. Revising our historical narratives for writing assessment in the United States—and for accountability testing, specifically—this chapter contributes to developing conversations about the relationships of race and (dis)ability to writing assessment, revealing these social formations to have been concerns central to assessment's emergence.

### **Accountability Rhetoric in Writing Assessment**

Accountability rhetoric occupies a complex, contested space within the present-day intellectual terrain of educational assessment. Though Mann identified assessment-based accountability with social justice reform—as have countless education reformers in the century and a half since Mann's death (see, e.g., L. Shepard; Wagner)—the word “accountability” seems to have acquired a less favorable set of associations for many assessment scholars writing in the



wake of No Child Left Behind. The rhetoric of accountability, we are told, has fueled a coercive managerialism and “audit culture” in schools (Biesta; Jacobson), participating in a broader “rhetoric of crisis” that spreads standardization and authorizes neoliberal encroachments by private corporations into public education (Addison and McGee; Gallagher, “Being There”; Suspitsyna; see also K. Miller). However unsparing these critiques of accountability rhetoric appear at first, though, closer inspection reveals them to be less invested in challenging the social justice ideal of accountability—that is, holding someone responsible for student learning and outcomes—than they are committed to questioning *who* is to be held responsible, *how*, and by *whom*. Thus, Gert J. J. Biesta’s critique of accountability rhetoric is couched within an effort to explore how “the democratic potential of accountability can be regained” (234). And Chris Gallagher “does not deny that teachers and schools ought to be accountable” (“A Seat” 507), but wants teachers to have “a seat at the table of education reform” (506) and seeks to expand the scope of accountability to include the “corporations to which education is ‘contracted out’” (505; cf. Sharer, Morse, Elbe, and Banks).

More recently, the social justice turn in writing assessment scholarship seems to have put new wind in the sails of accountability rhetoric—albeit, blown from a different direction. “Responsibility” has emerged as a key term within this movement, with several assessment scholars (including the present writer) taking inspiration from justice theorists like Iris Marion Young (see, e.g., Poe and Inoue; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*). As deployed in this body of scholarship, *responsibility* neatly approximates the social justice ideal of accountability, while distancing us from that term’s unwanted associations with a punishing, external authority. Responsibility sings the song of accountability in a local key, the tune of which can be heard whenever scholars take teachers to task for reinforcing unjust racial stratifications (e.g., Behm

and Miller; Inoue, *Antiracist*; Hammond, “Toward”), or when scholars call on institutions to identify the disparate impact of their assessments (e.g., Moreland; Poe and Cogan; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen; Toth). In all these cases, the rhetorical work done by assessment today remains consonant with the social justice affordances that Mann claimed for written examination in 1845: Writing assessment defines and displays, rendering the student body countable so that somebody can be held accountable. For this reason, present debates about the uses and meanings of accountability rhetoric might benefit from a more detailed historical understanding of its emergence. Returning to Mann’s 1845 examinations, we find eugenic fantasies of progress fund the work of counting student bodies. In Mann’s “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article, we find a kind of *ur-text* for educational crisis rhetoric, and we discover the hidden importance of writing assessment to that rhetoric: writing re-mediates the mind as data on the page, submitting it to new forms of analysis and display. These then-“new” forms were, this chapter shows, adapted to education from phrenology.

The tests administered to Boston’s common school students took the form of subject-specific short answer questions like the following, taken from the Grammar School “History” subtest:

*Question 1.* What is history?

*Ques. 2.* What are some of the uses of history?

*Ques. 3.* Enumerate some of the sources of history.

*Ques. 4.* What nations are among the first mentioned in history?

...

*Ques. 29.* What is chronology?

*Ques. 30.* What are the eras the most used in chronology? (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 326-327)

Perhaps understandably, this written examination has been remembered by scholars as an early example of achievement testing (e.g., Witte, Trachsel, and Walters) and accountability testing (e.g., Madaus), rather than intelligence or ability testing—its questions, seeming to ask

examinees for culturally-acquired information, rather than mining for something more innate (see also Reese). Furthermore, we have been led to think of Mann's reform agenda as stemming largely from religious and secular humanist commitments to human improvement (Witte, Trachsel, and Walters), and to view the technical innovation of written examination—the first standardized and printed testing medium—as an outgrowth of 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrialization, and the efficiency and standardization imperatives that accompanied it (Williamson).

George Madaus stakes out this latter historiographic ground in his germinal *Testing as a Social Technology*, instructing that “Mann's use of testing as a political and administrative technique needs to be viewed in conjunction with a larger social movement of that time— industrial capitalism's developing commitment to standardization, uniformity, precision, clarity, quantification, and rational tactics (Staudenmaier, 1985, 1988, 1989)” (24). Calling attention to the contemporaneous emergence of written examination with “the administrative, communication, inspection, accounting, bureaucratic, and mechanical techniques that fostered conformity and resulted in the technology of interchangeable parts,” Madaus identifies Mann's embrace of print-based standardized examination as of a piece with “factory model” logics of mass production. “These techniques,” Madaus notes, “began at the Springfield Armory were well known throughout the textile mills and machine shops of New England when Horace Mann introduced the standardized written test to the Boston schools.”

When divorced from Mann's beliefs about mental culture and racial progress, the stories we tend to tell about Mann and written examination obscure as much as they reveal, reinforcing familiar dichotomies and narratives that fail to meaningfully engage with the eugenic dimensions of Mann's agenda. For instance, present-day distinctions between ability/intelligence and achievement/accountability testing rely on the conceptual separation of natural, heritable ability

and trained culture—a separation Mann makes clear he does not indulge in. For Mann, the examination of mental culture was *also* the examination of ability and hereditary mental power. Nature and nurture were taken to be two interanimating forces that, together, were responsible for racial makeup and progress (see Chapter 2). Moreover, Mann opens “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” by declaring that the examination of student writing is merely a proxy for something he believed essential for racial hygiene and development: *motivation*. Written examination captures schools’ “actual condition, as to present proficiency and ability” (H. Mann, “Boston” 289). This condition, in turn, “reveals, with inevitable accuracy, the *motive-powers* by which they have been governed; for, other things being equal, the proficiency made by pupils will always be greater or less, according to the elevated or the degrading character of the motives by which they are governed, and incited to study” (289, emphasis in original).

To the extent that Mann’s educational project sat at the intersection of religious and secular humanist progressivisms, George Combe’s brand of phrenology—so beloved by Mann—provided the intellectual bridge between the religious and the secular. The course of organic development, Combe taught, was set by God; natural law was divine law. Only by faithful “observance” of the natural laws of human development could the physical frame and mental faculties gain in power, and education had a key role to play in this observance: “Practical training, and the aid of every *motive* that can interest the feelings, are necessary to lead individuals to obey the natural laws” (*Constitution of Man ... Abridged* 13, emphasis mine). Here, the spiritual and secular converge.

This convergence of interests can be sensed in Mann’s 1845 editorial introduction to Volume VII of the *Common School Journal* (the same volume that includes “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools”). Reworking and extending the idea that Americans are a new race,

Mann's introduction for Volume VII explores the idea that *children* are a new race—each rising generation, providing racial replenishment and opportunities for progressive racial revision. By this logic, it stands to reason that American children represented for Mann a “new race” twice over: as American, a racial break from moribund, degenerating Old World stock; as children, a rejuvenation and renewal of that New World race. Mann takes thematic inspiration for this introduction from the 1842 text *Thoughts on Moral and Spiritual Culture* by fellow Bostonian (and fellow Combe acolyte) Reverend R. C. Waterston. Mann begins his introduction by quoting Waterston at length, enjoining readers to see in children the racial future:

Here is the replenishing of the world. Here is a new wave of existence. From these little children will be selected the judges and statesmen of the next half century. Thus are we the creators of a world's destiny. We are moulding the elements of coming society. ... We take one race, and *score them all over with errors*; then God seems, in his kindness, to say, “Here is a new race—begin once more.” (“Editor's Introduction to Volume VII” 111, emphasis mine)

Children are both “figures who serve as symbolic bearers of sociocultural identity for a community” (Heng 58), and are also, by this fact, symbolic bearers of communal futurity and renewal—racial history embodied; the race, reborn. Suggestively, the need for racial renewal is not merely the impermanence of the outgoing race, but also their *error*, a term that—in true, Combean form—cuts across spiritual and somatic registers. Error is, at once, a matter of sinful transgression, marring the soul, and is materialized as *scoring*: marking, notching, cutting. To be scored is to be inscribed. Error is carved into the soul, written into the race, disfiguring and degrading it. While heir to these errors, children present themselves as a racial remedy, an opportunity to rewrite the racial future. Out with the error-scored old, in with the inchoate new.

Those eager to situate written examination alongside the historical development of industrial capitalism (see, e.g., Elliot *On a Scale*; Madaus; Williamson) will find much of interest in Mann's *Common School Journal* editorial introduction for Volume VIII, released just weeks

after the conclusion of “Boston Grammar Writing Schools.” We learn that Mann understood his educational project as being of a piece with industrial capitalist innovations like the Springfield Armory—though not, *pace* Madaus, in the way we might initially expect. Mann was familiar with the famous Springfield Armory, but considered it a marvel precisely because it signaled the supremacy of (white) American civilization over those he dismissed as savages or barbarians. “Compare ... the bow and arrow with the armories at Springfield or Woolwich; and the canoe in which a dozen Indians paddle to the battle-field, or the ambush, with the navy of America or the armadas of Britain,” Mann enjoins us (“Editor’s Introduction to Volume VIII” 154). The “factory model” represented in the Springfield Armory is indeed one Mann values and valorizes—but he configures this value in racial terms.

A mere two sentences earlier in this same text, we might notice Mann’s favorite photographic instrument mobilized to a related rhetorical effect, contrasted favorably against what Mann believed to be its (patently inferior) primitive counterpart: “Compare ... a colored skin or a bedaubed board with Daguerreotyping; the speed of an Indian runner with the magnetic telegraph!” (“Editor’s Introduction to Volume III” 154). To the extent, then, we want to read Mann’s standardized, printed examinations as analogous to the Springfield Armory, Mann would have likely welcomed this comparison—he goes so far as to invite this kind of comparison when identifying his own testing technology as a mental daguerreotype. If Mann engages, as Michael Williamson argues, in the “worship of efficiency,” it behooves us to remember that Mann took industrial efficiency to be one of many guises of racial development.

The general idea of correcting texts as ways to correct authors is well-known to historians of writing education—though this logic is often imagined to surface later in the century, the manufacture of Harvard’s late 19<sup>th</sup>-century turn to instruction in vernacular English writing, or

else emerging efficiency imperatives and factory-models of schooling. In her account of the former, Susan Miller explains,

This particular way of emphasizing mechanical correctness ... translated the student's written language into a potentially diseased student "body." This body was examined, categorized as "diseased" or "well" in specific anatomical places, and made available for new "treatments." It could be "cleaned up," "polished," and even "pruned," in all the invasive ways that the correction of language implies. ("Composition" 29; cf. Carlson and Albright)

Though this description bears a family resemblance to the error-fixation of the 1845 examinations, it does not clarify for us the deeper meanings and stakes that error had within Mann's reform agenda—nor does it reveal to us what Mann and his colleagues *counted* as error, and how they enlisted multimodal visualizations of error in pursuit of justice. We too readily retrofit early writing assessment history to accommodate present-day scripts for understanding assessment, tidying away its complexities and sanding off its confounding edges. This chapter flips these scripts, helping to reveal the eugenic substance that lurks beneath the surface of those stories our historiography has, to date, been more eager to embrace. Error was important to document because it corrupted and diminished the racial body, leaving future generations with diminished mental and physical capacities. Education mattered to Mann because it disciplined bodies and it exercised minds, moving the *new* American race closer to a *new* race of Apollos with every *new* race of children—a progressive racial march in the direction of the divine.

As part of the 1845 written examinations, student performance is reconfigured as a body of errors—a daguerreotype likeness, exposing all the ways the new race has been *scored all over*. This was how Mann cashed out his investment in a writing construct that imagined the text as a human body and the human body as a text. When we retrieve the materiality of the term "scoring," and its racial meanings within Mann's brand of phrenology, we gain access to a counter-history of sorts for what is arguably the most common term in the vocabulary of writing

assessment. To “score” writing is not, in the truest sense, to impose a mark on it. When we activate the ecology of assumptions and aims at work in Mann’s assessment-rhetoric for written examination, we encounter a deeper meaning for scoring: To *score* a paper accurately is to reveal, through assessment, the inner *racial scoring*—the race-writing inscriptions—already sustained by the writer. Score reporting, to Mann, had profound meaning for his efforts to compose progress in the United States. Blunders in writing correspond to errors marking students’ minds, corrupting the developmental course of the New American Race. Mann’s rhetorical project for written examination was to expose these corruptions and to publicize them—shaping public sentiment and spurring the public to reform Boston’s common schools. To understand this work, we must first understand Mann’s phrenological approach to rhetorically appraising the world around him, an approach that has become so ubiquitous in educational assessment that it might seem to us a history-less, universal feature of education itself: *inward reading*.

### **The Phrenological Rhetoric of Inward Reading**

The scientific culture of phrenology in the United States—with its fixations on measured bodies, and fantasies of measurably improving them—sought to accomplish a revolution greater than the spread of self-consciousness and hygienic habits throughout the American body politic. In addition to these changes, phrenology sought to more fundamentally alter the very ways we saw, interpreted, and interacted with human bodies. This revolution in reading the human form was one the retailer O. S. Fowler and the reformer Horace Mann alike attempted to spark by training the public to generate and assess multimodal bodies of scientific data—not only cranial measurement charts and physiognomic sketches of facial form, calisthenic and dietetic reports,



but also statistical representations of population, and pedigree charts and descriptions. School reports and tabular displays of student performance were contributions added to this list by Mann and his 1845 Examining Committee colleagues, principal among whom was Mann's friend and phrenological *confrère* Samuel Gridley Howe. These representations of the Boston's collective student body—which sought to hold schools accountable through new means of rendering students countable—participated in the broader rhetorical push to encourage and cultivate a phrenological literacy in the American public, persuading the public to adopt new habits of assessment. Habits that looked to the body's outward surface to appraise its invisible, inward features.

In *Rhetoric in the Flesh*, T. Kenny Fountain calls this kind of habituation into a scientific or medical community “trained vision,” which extends beyond abstract “knowledge and know-how” to include “ways of viewing that knowledge and the objects and discourses of that knowledge, ways of being in the world that shape the lived experience of participants” (4). Open a phrenology textbook, and you will find their particular variant of trained vision on offer, promising a textual laboratory of sorts, not entirely unlike the present day gross anatomy labs discussed by Fountain—comprised, as they are, of “an assemblage of discourses, displays, objects, and embodied practices that over time develop in participants a trained vision that shapes how they view and respond to the human body” (19). This, at least, was the phrenology movement's proselytizing goal. Re-viewing popular phrenology texts like the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century self-education literatures peddled by Fowlers and Wells Co., Julie Prebel has argued for an understanding of phrenology's visual culture as being also a rhetorical culture, as one of several historical “sites of persuasion that encourage readers-viewers to practice new modes of seeing” (para. 7). Fowler and his colleagues, Prebel notes, marshalled a legion of multimodal data

visualizations to sponsor ways of seeing and acting, deploying “drawings, tables, photographs, and figures to give readers towards [in the words of O. S. and L. N. Fowler] ‘cultivating, restraining, and rightly directing’ their ‘mental faculties’ (viii)” (para. 11).

True to its name, Fowler’s “practical” phrenology was a science intended to shape popular practice, and to be practiced by the public. To aid in this effort, the visualizations circulated by phrenologists like the Fowlers were enframed by detailed descriptions of how to read them, training readers where to look, what to look for, and what interpretative schemes should be overlaid onto the bodies being scrutinized. So it is that the rhetorical self-education of Mary Virginia Montgomery, discussed in the Chapter 1, doubles as a rhetorical induction of Montgomery into the cultures of visibility and assessment practiced by phrenologists. When she encountered, in the *Phrenological Journal* she subscribed to, descriptions of how facial features signaled racial tendencies, or how head shape indexed mental strengths, she was being taught ways to interpret the bodies around her as texts, and given rubrics for assessing them. Put another way, Montgomery’s readings supplied her with instructions for how to define bodies and their attributes—assigning them meanings and natures.

Definitions like these impose a rhetorical order on the world, schematizing our appraisals of it; they also “put into practice a special sort of social knowledge—a shared understanding among people about themselves, the objects of their world, and how they ought to use language” (Schiappa 3; see also Hammond “Definitive”). Montgomery might read, in her copy of O. S. and L. N. Fowlers’ *Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology, with One Hundred Engravings and a Chart of the Character*, that “shape is as character” and that “homely, disjoined exteriors indicate corresponding interiors” (15). Internalizing this general phrenological principle of “form,” Montgomery would read how to apply the human form, taking in the

diagnostic tips left by the Fowlers—her vision trained to apply phrenological their biases. “In this interaction between the phrenologist, the image, and the viewer,” Prebel notes, “there is the notion that scientific authority helps to corroborate human vision; if the viewer is not sure what to look for in the image or what they should ‘know’ by observing it, the phrenologist will point them towards an interpretation” (para. 12).

Mann’s phrenology was no less practical in orientation, directed as it was toward enacting proper race-writing practices in the classroom, and toward inspiring the public to promote reforms to this end. Mann’s pedagogical variant of trained phrenological vision, though, departed in an important way from what was advocated by Fowler and Wells Co. The most common portrait of phrenologists portrays them as hermeneuts of the skull and brain, reading character into and through cranial topographies—phrenology and physiognomy being “discourses *of* the head *for* the head” which “serve to legitimate on organic grounds the dominion of intellectual over manual labor” (Sekula 12). While Mann certainly traded in these “discourses of the head,” we must be careful not to underrepresent the interpretative field he believed could sustain mental measurement. As disability theorist Tobin Siebers teaches us, “The making of any object, out of any substance, by a human being is also in some way a making and remaking of the human” (136). In a similar manner, Mann believes that internal mental culture is, in some way, legible in *any* external product of that culture. The head is not the sole surface on which mental power can be gauged; the mental body is exteriorized and legible in somatic, artefactual, literary, and linguistic bodies.

The daguerreotype likeness Mann raves about—reproducing the invisible inner mind on publicly visible paper—is only one prominent instance of the more general hermeneutic approach he sought to inculcate in the American public. In his *Annual Reports* and published

lectures, Mann promotes a phrenological regime of sight that discerns, in every artificial surface and form, the histories and processes that led to them. Mann identifies this trained vision as use of the *inward eye*: “The outward eye sees outward things, and the outside of things only; but the inward eye beholds the interior laws that govern and inform them. The natural eye looks upon the works of nature only as a letterless man looks upon a book or a library; but the inward eye is emancipated from the bonds that bind its brother” (*A Few Thoughts...Man* 30). Mann’s use of the inward eye—or, as I will refer to it, his approach to *inward reading*—recurs throughout his writings, with Mann taking the bodily surface as the sign for inner mental culture. In each description, Mann is—like Fowler—doing more than merely describing; he is also prescribing ways of inwardly reading the world, helping to habituate his readers to this rhetorical order for appraising and entitling things. His assessment-rhetoric enacted ways of reading bodies for the errors that scored them, with the persuasive aim of remedying those errors through school reform.

To exercise and train readers’ inward eyes, Mann stocks his speeches with examples illustrating how to appraise form to find inner racial substance. In each, he identifies a site for inward reading, and aids his readers in cultivating a discriminating vision—focused by phrenological biases and beliefs about development. When doing so, he innovates on the traditional phrenological script by connecting the health of individual bodies to collective social health—inwardly reading in an individual’s hygiene the dangers confronting the race as a whole. Mann’s 1853 lecture *A Few Thoughts for a Young Man*, for instance, configures not just the skull but the entire human body as a convergence of physical zones wherein morality and intellect—both exercise-contingent mental properties—can be screened.<sup>43</sup> Submitting these bodies to inward reading, Mann models how their racial worth (or threat) can be appropriately gauged.

Mann offers readers what he intends as an instructive diptych: comparative snapshots of the lively Patriarch and the moribund Roué. He instructs his symbolic audience, the proverbial Young Man, “who is just forming his habits of life, or just beginning to indulge those habitual trains of thought out of which habits grow, to look around him, and *mark* the examples whose fortune he would covet, or whose fate he would abhor” (*A Few Thoughts...Man* 20, emphasis mine).

Intentionally pedagogical, Mann’s written recreation of these bodies models ways of *marking* them—methods of reading the mind in flesh and frame, and appraising their features or flaws, like so many characters inked on paper. Each body is, in its way, the product of a habit of life that extends from habits of thought; each embodies a circuit of conduct, a habit of mind that doubles as a habit of *kind*.

Of the Patriarch’s body, Mann teaches that,

His erect form, his firm step, his elastic limbs, and undimmed senses, are so many *certificates* of good conduct; or, rather, so many jewels and orders of nobility with which nature has honored him for his fidelity to her laws. His fair complexion shows that his blood has never been corrupted; his pure breath, that he has never yielded his digestive apparatus for a vintner’s cess-pool; *his exact language and keen apprehension*, that his brain has never been drugged or stupefied by the poisons of distiller or tobacconist. (*A Few Thoughts...Man* 20, emphasis mine)

The body testifies to past behavior; the look, the gesture, precision of the foot and tongue—so many signs of inner worth, itself a function of adherence to nature’s developmental dictates. Importantly, too, purities of language use and skin provide spaces for testing pollutions of outer and inner form, intoxications written permanently in the body and voice. Mann’s somatic assessments, here, are telling. The natural ideal against which imperfections become visible is a fair complexion, with lightness and whiteness signifying beauty and blood purity. The health and power of the brain is literally *symbolized* in language, linguistic defects announcing mental

defects that might otherwise have escaped notice—the polished imbecile, shielded from view by silence. And, if the patriarch is not yet an Apollo striding the earth, Mann makes no pretense of hiding his proximity to the divine: “Painlessly as a candle burns down in its socket, so will he expire; and a little imagination would convert him into another Enoch, *translated* from earth to a better world without the sting of death” (20-1, emphasis mine).

With a sinister flourish, Mann enjoins us to turn our inward eye from the Patriarch to “look at an opposite extreme, where an *opposite history is recorded*. What wreck so shocking to behold as the wreck of a dissolute man ... in himself a lazar-house of diseases; dead, but, by a heathenish custom of society, not buried” (*A Few Thoughts...Man 21*, emphasis mine). Again, we are presented the body as recording device and display, a portal of sorts through which the past can be glimpsed. The Roué’s body is a study in disorder Mann seemingly cannot help but describe as a literary artifact:

Rogues have had *the initial letter of their title* burnt into the palms of their hands; even for murder, Cain was only branded on the forehead; but over the whole person of the debauchee or the inebriate, the *signatures of infamy are written*. How nature *brands* him with stigma and opprobrium! How she hangs *labels* all over him, to testify her disgust at his existence, and to admonish others to beware of his example! (21, emphasis mine)

These stigmata take the form of physical maladies and distortions, a denaturing that transforms the Roué into something subhuman—something closer to an orang-outan than a man. Nature “bends forward his frame, as if to *bring him upon all-fours with kindred brutes*, or to degrade him to the reptile’s crawling!” (21, emphasis mine). Yet the danger of the dissolute man is not exclusively in the internal corruptions his body represents, but also in the corruption that body’s continued existence spreads to the race—its habits, the untrained eye might see and imitate.

Mann’s final appraisal of the Roué is unforgiving:

Society is infinitely too tolerant of the *roué*,—the wretch whose life-long pleasure it has been to debase himself and to debauch others; whose heart has been spotted with

infamy so much, that it is no longer spotted, but hell-black all over; and who, at least, *deserves* to be treated as travellers say the wild horses of the prairies treat a vicious fellow,—the noblest of the herd forming a compact circle around him, heads outward, and kicking him to death. (22, emphasis in original)

Mann prescribes ways of seeing and judging the Roué, recommending to readers the punishment befitting the crime of his existence. A cultural contagion, the Roué embodies habits of life and habitual trains of thought that ought to be purged from the social body. Education provides a kind of pre-emptive purgative, a training of body and mind that obviates the need for trampling the Roué. Under proper mental governance through the common school, the Roué would have been pre-scripted out of existence.

Mann calls on the powers of his inward eye to appraise not only histories of mental habit inscribed into the body, but also to see intellect structured into human-produced artifacts, including the architectural forms and spatial bodies that provide the topography of social life. Compare the work of the proverbial “uninstructed man” with that of “the intelligent,” and you will (perhaps unsurprisingly) find that “their products will come out *stamped* and *labelled* all over with *marks* of contrast: superiority and inferiority, both as to quantity and quality, will be *legibly written* on their respective labors” (H. Mann, “Fifth Report” 127, emphasis mine). Mann clarifies that the contrast legible between the laborers is one with developmental significance: “the mental difference between them places them in the same relation to each other that a past age bears to the present. If the ignorant man knows no more respecting any particular art or branch of business than was generally known during the last century, he belongs to the last century; and he must consent to be outstripped by those who have the light and knowledge of the present” (126). Mann’s inward readings of the mind carry a moral and sound a note of menace: embody progress or prepare yourself for superannuation and subjugation. The dustbin of history awaits those with inferior mental culture.

Relatedly, when speaking of “the form of intelligence” (“Advantages of Knowledge” 289), Mann establishes lines of equivalence between the somatic, artefactual, and architectural bodies, each serving as a register for national intelligence. Adopting the point of view of an itinerant anthropologist, he documents that,

The traveller sees it, when he passes from an educated into an uneducated nation. There are countries in Europe, lying side by side, where, without compass or chart, without bound or land-mark, I could run the line of demarcation between the two, by the *broad, legible characters* which ignorance has *written* on roads, fields, houses, and the persons of men, women, and children on one side, and which knowledge has *inscribed* on the other. (“Advantages of Knowledge” 289, emphasis mine)

Space conforms to intelligence, mental disparities bounding the nation as clearly as any map could. The civilization may be composed of an ecology of human bodies and artifacts, but it is also recapitulated in them. To gaze inwardly at urban infrastructure is to read the group mind of a nation, and to take stock of the intellect informing it. The artificial world is remade as a portfolio of culture, externalizing our priorities and our capacities, such that “our *works* are the visible embodiment and representation of our *feelings*” (H. Mann, “An Historical View” 278, emphasis in original).

Mann’s backhanded praise for the artifacts of ancient Egyptian civilization speaks to his sense of their inward significance. “The dull and heavy Egyptians,” Mann lectures, “have left us the *visible impress and emblem of their minds*, in their indistinct hieroglyphics, their ponderous architecture, and in their pyramids, which exhibit magnificence without taste, costliness without elegance, and *power without genius*” (H. Mann, “An Historical View” 277, emphasis mine).

“Dull,” “heavy,” “ponderous”—to read Mann’s adjectives alone, we might be at a loss for whether he is characterizing a people or their architecture. The inner nature of each, it seems, is informed by the same mental character. Yet while Mann cites architecture and the pyramids as emblemizing the Egyptian mind, he directs our inward attention first to *written language* in the



form of hieroglyphics. Indeed, language provides what Mann seems to consider the site most conducive to assessment of the mind. The linguistic body provides a basis for an inward reading of mental culture and racial development—connections considered in the next section.

For Mann, steeped in phrenological understandings of how to read the human form, and zealous about improving it, the interpretive scheme embodied in written examination redefined errors in student writing as signs of inner mental error—as errors scoring their heritable racial bodies. His assessment work situated student writing within a definitive ecology that invested the page with racial meaning and evolutionary stakes. In effect, when a student was asked to compose definitions on the page, what’s at stake is that these definitions were taken to *also* define the writer’s mental state and worth—each composition, a daguerreotype likeness of the mind that authored it. Score reporting took these mental photographs, and circulated them for public consumption, narrating for the lay reader’s “common” eye what the inward eye sees. It is to this phrenological score reporting we turn next.

### **Motives Are Every Thing: Inwardly Reading Student Development**

Reforming the common school required the phrenologist’s inward eye and the propagandist’s pen. In an August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1845 letter to Samuel Gridley Howe—chair of the Grammar School Examining Committee—Mann reveals a shrewd awareness of the rhetorical potential latent in the trove of data his Examining Committees had generated. Displaying thinking Madaus has called “distinctly contemporary” in its resemblance to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century accountability testing discourse (23), Mann stresses to Howe the importance of carefully choreographed publicity. “Some pieces should be immediately written for the papers,” Mann insists, “containing so much of an analysis of the answers, as will show that the pupils answered

common and memoriter questions far better than they did questions involving a principle; and it should be set forth most pointedly, that, in the former case, the merit belongs to the scholars, in the latter, the demerit belongs to the masters” (Horace Mann to Samuel Gridley Howe, 29 Aug. 1845, emphasis in original; see also Madaus 22-3; Reese 119-20). Ostensibly a means of appraising student attainment, written examination had a deeper significance for Mann. He interpreted it as a means of assessing the motivational strategies used by teachers to promote the mental culture of their students. Student failures testified to teacherly recourse to low motives, like fear. Read student writing, Mann believed, and you can assess the pedagogical inscriptions made in students’ minds, recapitulated in their habits of thought, and externalized onto paper. To the inward eye, errors on the page provided powerful insights.

Students were being scored all over with race-writing errors. The public had to be alerted.

As a rhetorical vehicle for promoting reform, Mann’s famous “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article provided the public a picture of common school instructional failure, visualizing the inner world of the classroom for stakeholders outside its walls, and narrating for them how student errors should be interpreted and understood. A complex psychology underpinned this scheme—and much of the article is devoted to explaining the psychology of written error to readers, narrating for them how to inwardly read the data being reported. Mann’s interest was less in documenting error frequency than in conducting and publicizing a kind of early error analysis (see, e.g., Santa), scrutinizing error patterns to suss out the instructional strategies that led to them—and coaching the public on how to do the same. Framed by commentary from Mann and his Examining Committee colleagues, the daguerreotype likeness generated by written examination were imagined to provide the public a durable reproduction of

students' minds, allowing errors to be readily marked and error patterns to be easily remarked on.

The picture taken, while not pretty, “*does determine, beyond appeal or gainsaying, whether the pupils have been faithfully taught*” (H. Mann, “Boston” 332, emphasis in original).

The reason for this? Mann asserted that,

All pupils of average ability, who have been properly taught, should have a command, not merely of the particular fact, or the general statement of a truth or principle, but also of its connections, relations and applications; and every faithful examiner will strive to know whether they possess the latter as well as the former species of information. . . . [I]t is this, and this only, which can be appropriately called *teaching*. All short of this is mere journey-work, rude mechanical labor and drudgery. (332, emphasis in original)

To the inward eye, student answers testified to mental culture. By asking students both to *define* particular concepts and, in separate questions, to demonstrate an *understanding* of the principles underlying them, Mann believed he had found an aperture through which failures in mental culture could be made visible. The distance between superficially correct answers and meaningful understandings charts instructional ground not covered, exposing to view mechanical and mechanizing instruction—a breakdown in education that debilitates minds in desperate need of exercise.

Written examination was designed to expose this gap between command of facts and comprehension of their deeper connections and meanings. Success in the former without accompanying success in the latter signaled that students had not truly been taught; rather, they had been subjected to rote, mechanizing mental governance. With this presumed isomorphism between the mental character of students and the instructional quality of common schools, it was possible for Mann to talk of the same written examination as picturing two different dimensions of educational progress. In his “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” write-up in the *Common*

*School Journal*, he called written examination “[a] *transcript*, a sort of Daguerreotype likeness ... of the state and condition of the pupils’ minds” (334), while in a July 4<sup>th</sup> 1845 letter to the abolitionist Reverend Samuel J. May, describing written examination instead “a *transcript* of the actual condition of the schools” (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 238) (emphases mine). The condition of the mind and the school were one and the same—each transcribed onto paper through written examination.

Drudgery did not properly exercise the mind or cultivate the faculties; instead, it risked stunting the intellect, making students into little more than automata. Providing one example of this tendency in their formal report, Mann’s Grammar School Examining Committee note that when students were asked, “*Define momentum*,—133 out of the 279 answered correctly. But to the question, If a grindstone should suddenly split in pieces while whirling rapidly around, would the pieces fall directly to the ground or not?—only 63 out of the 279 answered correctly” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 297, emphasis in original). Less than half of the students are able to successfully write the definition of “momentum,” but—more damningly—less than half of even *those* students are able to demonstrate a context-specific understanding of the otherwise correct definition they conjured. Here was the pedagogical danger written examination exposed: Students may have been led, by rote instruction, to memorize a correct answer, yet with little more than a surface-level comprehension of that answer. Form without content, words divorced from the things they are intended to signify.

Concerned that the developmental needs of the new race of American students were not being appropriately tended to, Mann and his examiner colleagues held that 1845 written examinations revealed a “deplorable state of things” in the common school (H. Mann, “Boston” 363). Understanding well the complexities of what was then non-compulsory schooling, Mann

knew of several potential causes for student failure. Student absenteeism—and thereby flawed parenting—could be partly to blame. A father who keeps his child home sows the seeds of long-term intellectual disability: “He does not see, that, for every day’s absence of his child, so much mental nourishment is withheld, his growth so much retarded, and that he is preparing to send out that child into the world an intellectual dwarf” (H. Mann, “Fourth Report” 74). Raw teacherly neglect or ineptitude (e.g., delivering incorrect content or no content at all) could also account for some gaps in student knowledge. These sources of error, though, were not Mann’s primary causes for concern.

What disturbed Mann most were pedagogical practices that prepared students for surface-level correctness, while masking and leaving in place deeper substance-level errors. This profile of error was, Mann believed, a byproduct of the *way* teachers made inscriptions in students’ minds—the sad result not of student absenteeism or absent course content, but of improper motivational strategies used by teachers. Mann believed that students whose written responses match this profile had been victim to mechanizing instruction, spurred on by what he called “low motives.” Mann considered motivation paramount for promoting student development and proper habits of mind: “in the education of children, *motives are every thing*, MOTIVES ARE EVERY THING” (emphasis in original; see also Tomlinson 257). Within the ecology of phrenological meanings circulating through Mann’s writing construct, motivation determines the nature and quality of mental exercise students receive; it determines also the habits of mind students form and that, we might say, *form* students, inscribing in them the character they will bear for life. To govern students through recourse to low motives was to pervert the course of their development and risk stunting mental growth.

Specifically, Mann and his colleagues note two common motive-powers they believe deleterious to student development: *emulation* and *fear*. “Emulation” is Mann’s term for the incitement of competition between students—or, as he puts it, the act of “mating the children against each other, to study for a prize” (“Boston” 364). Setting “each scholar against all his classmates” is, at best, a double-edged motive to employ. Emulation rewards the naturally superior while discouraging their intellectually inferior peers, so that

use of this incentive may make a few brilliant scholars for exhibition, yet a large majority of each class will soon find that a competition with their better endowed fellow-pupils, or with those who can receive assistance at home, is hopeless, and will therefore abandon all efforts at rivalry, in despair; and the consequence will inevitably be, that when an *average* of the attainments of the class is taken,—as must be done in a written examination—the general condition of the whole will be degraded by it. (364, emphasis in original)

Thus sensitized to the futility of competing against their betters, the average masses of the common school withdraw from study and habituate themselves to mediocrity, dulling what the Grammar School Committee called “[t]he natural love for mental exercise” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 321). Even emulation, though, was not so dreadful a low motive as “that of Fear, excited by the use of Corporal Punishment,” which Mann and his colleagues found “to be admitted on all hands” and to have “been employed to a most pernicious extent, in some of the schools.” Fear might ensure compliance from students, but cannot excite them to deeper understandings, and risks functioning as a kind of mental paralytic. Corporal punishment spreads “through the school” a “general condition of mind, either of intense and *disabling* alarm, or of reckless hardihood and defiance” (364, emphasis mine). Mann regarded it as obvious that students motivated by emulation or fear would fail to flourish, their minds marked only with surface-level inscriptions.

In his 1845 *Ninth Annual Report*—a text historically proximate to “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” and that praises written examination—Mann details some of the harmful ways low motive-powers ramify in mental culture. The motive-power of emulation might “increase the bulk and showiness of acquisition rather than improve its quality,” could guide “pupils to cultivate a memory for words rather than an understanding of things,” and, by this same logic, could effect an outcome where “the knowledge acquired . . . is short-lived, because it has been acquired for the temporary purpose of the recitation or examination rather than for usefulness in after-life” (“Ninth Report” 87). Earlier in this same report, Mann explains the importance of higher motives over fear and punishment by means of a grotesque racialized analogy: To see the instructional superiority of high motives over low ones, we need only compare the tactics employed by “some of the more sagacious slave-drivers at the South,” who have discovered of slaves that “the quantity of their work will be increased, and its quality improved, as their masters ascend higher and higher in the scale of motive-powers” (40).

Rather than resort to “the motive of bodily fear and smart” (corporal punishment being the apparent classroom parallel), these “sagacious” slavers exchange punishment for praise and fear for fineries (“Ninth Report” 40). In Mann’s own words, they “avail themselves of the love of appetite, the love of approbation, the desire of being bedizened with gaudy colors, and so forth”—all, he assures us, “more efficient agencies than pain.” Mann is apparently unburdened by the ethical horror of his example, which offers a conditional apology for slavery on the basis of motivational tactics inflicted on those in bondage. Apparently, too, Mann is untroubled by the sickening equations his parallel relies on: identifying slave-drivers with teachers, schoolchildren with slaves, and education with chattel slavery. Instead, he seems preoccupied principally with the possibility that his audience might miss the moral to this shocking story.

To ward off this unwelcome outcome, he concludes his parable about slavery and school-motives by spelling out its conceit: “Teachers should be children of light, and they should not permit the children of Mammon [i.e., slave-drivers] to be wiser in their generation than they. It should never be forgotten that the highest duty of a teacher is to produce the greatest quantity and the purest quality of moral action” (“Ninth Report” 40). It is their duty, in other words, to employ higher motive-powers when governing the minds of their captive charges. Quality and quantity of action correspond, the logic goes, to quality of student development. Low motives, like fear and emulation, might keep the majority of the new race docile, but cannot promise the development necessary to secure higher levels of mental culture and evolutionary progress. Motives are every thing. Without judicious use of them, what can the race expect to become?

### **Counting the Mechanical Mind’s “Abominable Blunders”**

Though much of “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” is dedicated to sketching the causes of student under-performance and excoriating educators for their dereliction of pedagogical duty, Mann’s editorial contributions to this piece gesture also to what he regarded as the dehumanizing effects of improper instruction. Mann renders the gap between formal correctness and substantive error in anatomical terms: “The elocutionary part of reading is but its *body*, the intellectual part is the *soul*, and the former without the latter is only a *dead mass of matter*” (356-7, emphasis mine). If active engagement with language re-acts on the mind, exercising and expanding it, what paltry developmental benefit could be offered by engaging with such a dead mass? Functionally, Mann suggests, students are being mentally reduced to the level of *parrots* and *automata*—charges more significant within Mann’s local intellectual context than might initially be apparent. To the inward eye, students who appear healthy and intelligent



on the outside were exposed as in danger of degeneration—mentally mechanized, and reduced to something other than fully human. At best, this breakdown in mental culture results in a kind of racial stasis, with students outwardly donning the guise of culture without its inner developmental effects. More frighteningly, underdevelopment of this kind might give cover to a dehumanizing ignorance that—by passing for intelligence—is allowed, unchecked and uncorrected, to pass down to future generations. Unexamined, a new race of automata might inherit the earth.

In the process of coaching readers of his “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article on how to interpret the “deficiencies” exposed by the 1845 examinations, Mann frets that “a student may most faithfully commit the whole of one of our grammars to memory, and yet know nothing more of the science of English Grammar, than a parrot, who has been taught to say ‘Pretty Poll,’ knows of the power and copiousness of the English language” (333). Metaphorizing students in this way, Mann summons a particular set of associations by then long-established within the pages of the *Common School Journal*. The student-as-parrot is an image that contributors to the *Common School Journal* return to again and again, presenting readers with a figure for mental vacuity and subhuman idiocy—the parrot, an animal masquerading as human, an imbecile lurking behind a polished linguistic surface (see, e.g., Bolles 76; Palmer 276; “Plymouth” 197; see also Reese 22-3; Stuckey 72, 131). Mann himself reinforces this connection in his seventh *Annual Report*, deriding rote, abecedarian instruction—with students memorizing the sounds and shapes of letters—by scoffing, “[a] parrot or an idiot could do the same thing” (“Seventh Report” 309; see also Crain). Through rote instruction and mechanizing drudgery, students—like parrots—might be made capable of producing mechanically appropriate responses, while remaining devoid of full human understanding.

This interchangeability of “parrot” with “idiot” hints at a medical, pathologizing dimension to parrotry evident in Samuel Gridley Howe’s writings. A tell-tale feature of “[t]he idiot of the second class,” Howe claims, was having only the linguistic capacity to regurgitate certain classes of words “as a parrot does, without understanding” (*Training* 35; cf. Stuckey 72, 131). He made this pronouncement from a position of institutional authority. Howe was considered one of the nation’s foremost authorities on disability, founded the United States’ first formal school for the blind, and received considerable press during his lifetime for supervising the education of Laura Bridgeman, whom—deaf and mute from early childhood—Howe trained to read and write.<sup>44</sup> Howe evokes the figure of the comprehension-less parrot in the course of his *Common School Journal* summary of Bridgeman’s educational journey (“Dr. Howe’s Report” 153), and again in his personal writings, when describing the moment Bridgeman’s “intellect began to work” (*Letters* 57), describing a kind of mental metamorphosis from beast to human: “Hitherto the process had been mechanical, and the success about as great as teaching a very knowing dog a variety of tricks. . . . [A]t once her countenance lighted up with a human expression: it was no longer a dog, or parrot,—it was an immortal spirit, eagerly seizing upon a new link of union with other spirits” (*Letters* 57-8).<sup>45</sup> Humanity is conferred only at the point of comprehension and the potential for meaningful communication; fail to meet this standard to the satisfaction of your examiner, and the quality of your intellect will (at best) remain an open question.

The parrot, though, is only one guise for the mechanical mind that menaces Mann’s progressive project. Near the end of “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” Mann introduces the figure of the *automaton* to focus his audience’s inward eye. By the time Boston conducted its first city-wide written examinations, the spectacle of automata had, for decades, been a source of

popular curiosity and a site for contemplation of artifice, intelligence, and the boundaries of the human. The automaton that attracted the most press during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century was Johann Nepomuk Maelzel's "Chess Player," ostensibly a mechanical, chess-playing Turk, which toured antebellum America, challenging (and sometimes beating) those who flocked to see the artificial intelligence in operation (see Aytes). Maelzel's mechanical Turk was, of course, a hoax, and was publicly accused of being such by a number of 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers (including Edgar Allen Poe), but the Chess Player endured as a popular emblem for the mechanical mind, and the challenges it might pose to human identity and rationality (Riskin; Standage). Mann mobilized this powerful popular imagery to help readers visualize the developmental significance and stakes of the motive-powers at work in the common school classroom. He sets the stage:

It would be painful to find that a teacher had abandoned his children, and had spent his time in fitting up a hundred of *Maelzel's automata*, which could be made to utter words by the turning of a crank; but it would not be half so deplorable as to find living minds, with faculties all hungering and thirsting for information, with powers capacious of old thoughts, and capable of originating new ones,—to find such *minds turned into automata*, and made to utter pages of words, month after month, and year after year, with no proper conception of their beauty, their wisdom, or their truth. ("Boston" 357, emphasis mine)

This automatizing of the mind was not science fiction, Mann claimed. It was the reality confronting students, if race-writing reforms were not put in place.

Mann's invocation of Maelzel's mechanical Turk seems also subtly to underscore the racial threat posed by improper schooling. As Ayhan Aytes points out, the *Turkishness* of the mechanical chess-player is not without meaning; it is explicitly "an automaton that carries significations of Oriental 'other,'" the social meanings of which "are closely tied to Orientalist undercurrents" of thinking (83).<sup>46</sup> Maelzel's Mechanical Turk—its docile Orientalized body, positioned before a chess board (see Aytes)—presents onlookers with the spectacle of a mindless machine that, nevertheless, appears capable of correctly coordinating chess-pieces, even

outmaneuvering expert human competitors. The thrill and menace of the mechanical Turk was in its subversion of progressive expectation. Mind is bested by matter; intelligence annihilated by machinery; white Western modernity interrupted by an uncanny Oriental premodernity. By drawing lines of comparison between students and Maelzel's well-known automaton, Mann's message seems to be this: Under improper psychological management in the classroom, students are made something different from (indeed, something less than) the civilized and progressive (Western) citizen-subjects the new American nation requires them to be. Alienated from the promise of progressive intellectual growth, each student is left little more than an automaton Turk, a Parrot, a Chinese transcript, a Cretin of the third degree—a polished imbecile (see Chapter 2). Rigorous examination alone can put an end to this automatizing threat.

Each error scoring students' minds whittled away their humanity, Mann feared; assessing their written language use, it became possible to determine whether students were being reduced by pedagogical motive-powers into something subhuman. As Mann and his examiner colleagues catalogued and analyzed error patterns, writing quality was provided special attention. Mann continues, in his August 29<sup>th</sup> letter to Howe, to complain about the errors pervasive in student writing: "All those abominable blunders, which are even more to be condemned for their numbers than for their enormity,—in orthography, punctuation, capitalising and grammar, are the direct result of imperfect teaching. Children will not learn such things by instinct. They will not fail to learn them, under proper instruction. The blame, therefore, lies with the teachers" (Horace Mann to Samuel Gridley Howe, 29 Aug. 1845). Reading the Grammar and Writing School Reports alongside Mann's commentary on them, one can be forgiven for forgetting whether *students* or *errors in writing* are the protagonists of the reform drama being plotted. The Grammar School Examining Committee begin their report with a declaration that their

examination—in “black and white”—will “test their [students’] readiness at expressing their thoughts on paper” and will yield “positive and undeniable evidence of their ability or inability to construct sentences grammatically, to punctuate them, and to spell the words” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292).

Accordingly, examination of students’ “thoughts on paper” proceeds along two parallel tracks, not only documenting written errors related to subject matter knowledge, but also tracking and publishing—for each section of the examination—the number of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Errors are bifurcated in this way, at least partly, because the Grammar School Examining Committee felt that conflating errors of content and usage would have left them with little to analyze, claiming that, “If we had put down as correct only those answers which were perfect in regard to sense, to grammatical construction, to spelling and to punctuation, the record would have been very short” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292-3). Within the body of the Grammar School Examination Committee report itself, discussion of student performance is regularly interlaced with statistical accountings of writing error, like the following: “there should have been 57,873 answers ... but there were only 31,159, of which only 17,216 were correct in sense, leaving unanswered 26,714. The 31,159 answers contained 2,801 errors in grammar; 3,733 errors in spelling; and 35,947 errors in punctuation” (292; qtd. also in Tomlinson 284). These figurations of error, with numbers climbing into the thousands, diagram the shape and size of reform needed. Each mistake registers a mental error—a failure, that is, in culture, stunting the mental growth of Boston and calling the future of its people into question.

Performance in writing is taken by the Examining Committees to externalize habits inculcated into student minds—proof positive of the automatism induced by instructors. While admitting that a large number of errors by students made in punctuation likely “arose ... from

mere haste,” the Grammar School Committee does not take comfort in this conclusion (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292). Instead, they interpret this failure as yet another sign of systematically inadequate instruction, deeming that “punctuation is very much a matter of habit, and if the children had been accustomed to punctuate carefully, they would not have failed so egregiously” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292). Spelling performance, too, reveals something more than superficial error. The inward eye sees the absence of habit, noting “that it is difficult for our scholars to learn to spell correctly, without being more in the habit of writing than they now are” (297). While competently managed common schooling can—“except in cases of mental incapacity”—remedy this common disorder, pedagogical incompetence on this front leaves a lasting mark on students, in that “an inability to spell the commonly used words in our language justly stamps the deficient mind with the stigma of illiteracy” (H. Mann, “Second Report” 510).<sup>47</sup>

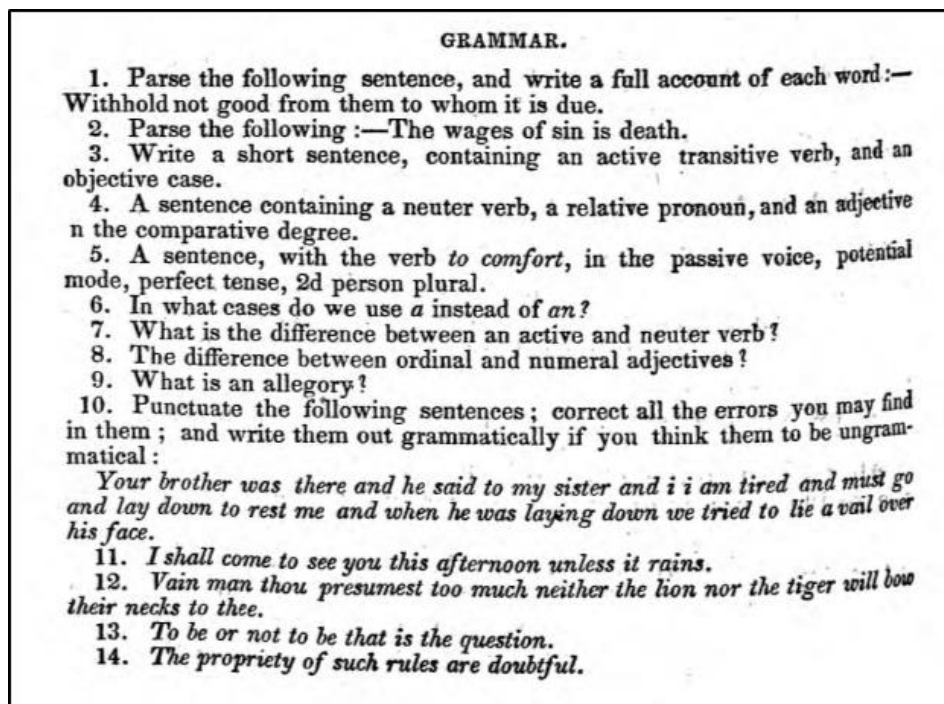


Fig. 2. 1845 Grammar School Examination “Grammar” Subject Test Questions (H. Mann, “Boston” 360).

The Grammar School Committee examined *grammar* itself twice over. First, “Grammar” was one of the six subject areas tested by the Committee, with students required to answer a sequence of 14 questions, requiring students to parse sentences, identify errors, and demonstrate an understanding of writing conventions, grammatical features, and rhetorical devices (see fig. 2 above). Second, and more expansively, errors in grammar were tallied throughout the examination, accounted for on each test section—including the “Grammar” section. Howe and his coauthors made use of this pluralization of grammar by juxtaposing “Grammar” section performance against the backdrop of grammatical errors in student writing on that same section. Doing so, they believed, provided another pinhole through which the inward eye can see a pedagogical reliance on mechanizing drill over mind-exercising engagement. They confide that,

the answers to the questions in grammar are the best proof that scholars may parse technically, and point out the relations of words, their mood, tense, case, person, number, and gender; and yet, *in the very sentences which they make use of to express these relations, and in quoting rules in justification of what they write, be continually making blunders*; and may parse their sentences grammatically, in the most ungrammatical language. The whole number of answers given was 4,183, and these contained 962 errors in spelling, 2,247 errors in grammar, and 8,980 errors in punctuation. (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 298, emphasis mine)

Apparent mastery of the concepts on the “Grammar” section is belied by blunders in writing. Superficial error, when inwardly read, reveals deeper developmental problems lurking beneath the page’s surface. The ability to compose without error doubles as demonstration that the underlying principles of grammar have been understood and internalized. And, considering Mann’s sense that language molds the mind—and that the *English* language, specifically, fits the mind for progress (see Chapter 2)—failures in the rudiments of written language might prove a particularly distressing portent of mental underdevelopment.

Counting these errors, it became possible to expose the mechanization of students’ minds, and to account for the motivational strategies employed by school masters in the classroom.

Counting and publicizing these errors scoring the student body, Mann and his examiner colleagues sought to hold Boston's common school teachers accountable for the abominable race-writing blunders they had made. One vehicle for this work was a new visual strategy, intended to increase the reach and sentimental impact of score reporting, was the *tabular display*. The rest of this chapter tells its story.

### **The Biopower of Human Tabulation**

Introducing the reports featured in "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools," Mann locates the revolutionary importance of the shift to written examination not only in "the *mode* of examination, at once thorough, and perfectly fair and impartial" ("Boston" 289, emphasis in original), but also in the ways that this mode of examination submits to effective public display. Though the fact has often fallen out of existing historical analysis, Mann's advocacy for written examination marks not only an origin point for writing assessment, but also for the multimodal display of writing assessment results, owing to the innovation of data tables created to visualize student error in "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools." These data tables inject a new visual instrument of biopower into the realm of American education, an assessment-rhetorical tool I call *inwardly displaying the student body*.

Because numerical displays of this kind have been, for some time, a mundane feature of score reporting—reducing students' literacies (see, e.g., Gorur) and aptitudes or abilities (see, e.g., Stein) to *numbers*—it might escape us that the quantification and tabulation of student performance is a complex rhetorical act. After all, numbers and their attendant forms of statistical display are "strategies of communication" that "conveniently summarize a multitude of complex events and transactions" (Porter viii). This convenient shorthand allows a diversity of



stakeholders—including those without specialized training—to comprehend otherwise-complex phenomena. Quantification serves, in this way, as a viral “technology of distance,” reconfiguring or translating local phenomena into a form that “can easily be transported across oceans and continents and used to coordinate activities or settle disputes” (Porter ix). Whether involving quantification or some other form of examiner response, educational assessment requires the imposition of interpretative order onto complex bodies of student-related data, deciphering and documenting their features or flaws.

Score reporting for the 1845 examinations provided an inward virtual witness for the public through a complex rhetoric of display, enmeshing tabular counts of student error with narrative accounts of how to interpret those tables—teaching readers how to *feel* about the errors scoring the student body. Mann and his colleagues positioned themselves as physicians, examining to the ailing student body in an open theater. Like all medical and scientific multimodal visualizations of the body, their tabular displays “carry a persuasive and ontological force that influences the formation and dissemination of scientific arguments, a force that shapes how scientists and nonscientists alike view these objects and phenomena” (Fountain 4). Indeed, Mann described this new tabular approach to representing human frailties in self-consciously rhetorical terms, describing it as one reason why the written examination-centric “Reports of the committees” could be counted “among the most remarkable, as well as the most instructive and admonitory of all our school documents” (“Boston” 289). And in subtle ways I will discuss below, this means of tabular display departs from other representational schemes in circulation at the time.

The tables generated were discipline-specific, displaying the results from one of the several subject matter-specific examinations administered to students—subjects like “History,”

“Definitions,” or “Grammar” (see, e.g., fig. 3 below). School-wide results were arrayed by row, with each column either documenting a detail of the examined group’s composition (e.g., “Average age of those examined”), accounting an aspect of that group’s written examination performance (e.g., “No. of incorrect answers given”), or statistically rendering the “Relative rank of the school.” In this tabular capture and rendition of error, Mann and his colleagues are taking part in what Molly Farrell has recently termed *human accounting*: “understanding human relationships through numbers” (8) by classifying and quantifying human bodies and behaviors—enumerating human beings, and ways of being. The choices we make in this accounting stands in, quite literally, for who and what we believe counts. Counting exposes the axes along which we plot our identities, capabilities, and properties; “every act of enumerating people ... reflects a particular *subjectivity*,” by which Farrell means ““what an individual or person may be”” (10, emphasis mine). As a kind of social technology that “embodies certain values that are often unrecognized and unexamined” (Madaus 5), assessment functions as the instrument of human accounting *par excellence* within education. No exception to this general rule, the assessment of writing is always already bound up in the effort to define and account for student subjectivity. Lester Faigley has charged that “our judgments about writing quality” are necessarily inflected with our beliefs, assumptions, and aims concerning “the subjectivities that students should occupy” (*Fragments* 114). Tracy Santa has made a similar observation about the nature of errors in writing, arguing that our constructions of error are socially and historically contingent, symbolic extensions of “how we have constructed student writing and student writers” (vii). Assessment gives social form and force to our beliefs about who students are and have been, as well as to our commitments concerning who they ought to be. As instances of human accounting and tabulation, each writing assessment advances a model of human

subjectivity, nature, and value—each represents a screening process that students are subjected to and through.

NAME OF SCHOOL.	Total No. of Scholars in the school.	No. examined.	Proportion of the school examined.	Average age of those examined.		No. of correct answers given to the whole No. of questions by the whole No. of scholars examined.	No. of correct answers there would have been, had all the scholars answered correctly.	No. of incorrect answers given.	No. of errors committed in Grammar.		No. of errors committed in Punctuation.	No. of questions not answered.	Per centage of correct answers.	Relative rank of the school.
				Yrs.	Ms.				No. of errors committed in Spelling, in giving the answers.	No. of errors committed in Punctuation.				
ADAMS,	418	20	.05	12	11	171	280	76	98	97	603	33	.61	.0305
BOYLSTON,	534	34	.06	14		169	476	136	199	91	882	171	.36	.0216
BOWDOIN,	508	43	.08	14	8	333	602	198	257	77	1014	71	.55	.0440
BRIMMER,	513	20	.04	13		94	280	114	149	67	389	72	.34	.0136
ELIOT,	456	19	.04	12	8	70	266	70	83	35	318	126	.26	.0104
ENDICOTT,	478	30	.06	13		136	420	102	140	87	821	182	.32	.0192
FRANKLIN,	418	19	.05	14	6	125	266	76	99	56	478	65	.47	.0235
HAWES,	408	17	.04	13	9	127	238	73	92	26	310	38	.53	.0212
HANCOCK,	509	45	.09	13	9	203	630	112	136	46	372	315	.32	.0288
JOHNSON,	547	49	.09	13	6½	315	686	134	183	43	696	237	.46	.0414
MATHER,	485	18	.04	14	6	116	252	82	109	32	403	54	.46	.0184
MAYHEW,	368	21	.06	13	6	75	294	94	128	29	357	125	.26	.0156
OTIS,	467	21	.04	13	2	43	294	44	62	49	213	207	.15	.0060
PHILLIPS,	440	35	.08	12	8	174	520	133	219	100	446	183	.36	.0288
SMITH,	163	8	.05			3	112	5	8	9	75	104	.03	.0015
WELLS,	307	29	.09	13	3	180	406	100	108	56	765	126	.44	.0396
WINTHROP,	507	28	.06	14	6½	183	392	117	177	62	838	92	.47	.0282
DUDLEY, } ROXBURY.	350	29	.08	14	6	207	406	99	121	14	663	100	.51	.0408

Fig. 3. Results from the 1845 Boston Grammar School “Grammar” Examination (H. Mann, “Boston” 361).

As an early educational foray into human accounting, the 1845 written examinations followed in the figurative footsteps of several already-established traditions of tabulation. To recall again Madaus’s historiographic location of written examination as a satellite in the orbit of industrial America’s burgeoning efficiency culture, we would not be wrong to notice some affinities between the Grammar and Writing School examination tables and the accounting instruments used to monitor and manage the financial and factory organs that carried the lifeblood of industrial capitalism. The ledger, however, had many homes in the early American

republic, owing partly to the fact that “human accounting was a representative tactic” of imperial population management and colonialist supervision—foundational to America’s political and economic infrastructures (Farrell 9). This foundational tactic was intimately connected to the United States’ original sins, used to manage the expropriation of resources from native peoples, and to subtend the system of human enslavement:

Long before Britain passed the census bill in 1800, or the newly created United States instituted its first census in 1790, merchants on slave ships tracked and enumerated people kidnapped and deported across the Atlantic in the service of someone else’s wealth. Through this economy, slaves, indentured servants, indigenous people, sailors, traders, bookkeepers, insurers, and plantation owners all became accustomed to viewing human bodies as numbers in a ledger. (9)

As “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” demonstrates, by (at least) the midpoint of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, educators could be added to this list of those familiar with human tabulation.

Howe and Mann were no strangers to the work of quantifying and tabulating human bodies. Each was, after all, a member of Boston’s statistical society—the first in the United States (Reese 56-7). Each would have also been familiar with the work of human accounting through their shared passion for phrenological race science and mental measurement. Not for nothing, the 1845 displays of Boston’s student bodies were continuous, in key respects, with the tabular modes of display often favored by phrenologists. Phrenological reading and analysis could be thought of as a peculiar form of writing assessment (see Chapter 2): Phrenologists used carefully curated craniometric records to draw inferences about human character and worth, and to promulgate ideas about innate racial differences in intellect—differences they saw as obvious in the contours of the skull (see, e.g., Morton). The phrenologist’s chart becomes a second body—a mental daguerreotype—portraitzing the self in numbers, by detailing the body’s dimensions, characteristics, and qualities.

This form of display, which opened up an individual body for inspection, is one we might call an *anatomo-political display*—“anatomo-politics” being Foucault’s preferred term for “techniques of power” (*History*, 140) that engage the anatomized “body as a machine,” composed of parts to monitor and manage (139). This type of rhetorical display quantifies features within a body, counting and accounting for individual capacities. Phrenology’s anatomo-political attachment to quantification derived from a belief in the power of numbers to represent and display developmental history. As Dan Bouk finds, “Phrenology and statistics shared one crucial similarity: both imagined the roots of the future to lay in an accessible past, in a past one could glean from bodies or tabulate from ledgers” (31; see also Reese). So taken was Mann with this numerical re-presentation of the head—quantifying and logging all of its dimensions—that on his deathbed, he asked that his own phrenological chart be reproduced “as the best testament to his own life and character” (Tomlinson 300).

Additionally, Mann undoubtedly was familiar with human accounting and tabular display through his work as a founding board member for Massachusetts’s Lunatic Hospital at Worcester, which regularly published tables accounting inmate health and progress, accompanied by narrative reports recounting the hospital’s administrative priorities and actions. In contrast to phrenology’s head measurement charts, these tables named and sorted different types of bodies, to show how an overall population was composed. We could call this visual strategy *bio-political tabulation*, in Foucault’s sense of “bio-politics”: “procedures of power” oriented to “the species body,” monitoring and managing how (and of whom) the population is composed (*History*, 139; see also Hacking, “Biopower”). This type of rhetorical display quantifies bodies that share particular features, counting and accounting for group differences. To cite one evocative bio-political example, the *Fourth Annual Report of the Trustees of the*

*State Lunatic Hospital at Worcester*—coauthored by Mann and published in 1837, the same year he assumed the state’s Education Secretaryship—features no fewer than 17 tables, detailing matters of the hospital’s treasury and superintendence, and as well as classifying patients by mental character and curability. The fourteenth of these tables classifies and counts patients by the type of insanity that brought them to the hospital—whether “Mania,” “Monomania,” “Dementia,” or congenital “Idiocy” (see fig. 4, below).

**TABLE 14.**  
*Classification with reference to the kind of Insanity.*

	Whole Number.	No. of each Sex.	Cured or Curable.	Total of Cured or Curable.
<b>Mania, . . .</b>	<b>292</b>			<b>158</b>
<b>Male, . . .</b>		<b>155</b>	<b>81</b>	
<b>Female, . . .</b>		<b>137</b>	<b>77</b>	
<b>Monomania, . . .</b>	<b>104</b>			<b>68</b>
<b>Male, . . .</b>		<b>64</b>	<b>38</b>	
<b>Female, . . .</b>		<b>40</b>	<b>30</b>	
<b>Dementia or Idiotic, . . .</b>	<b>79</b>			<b>5</b>
<b>Male, . . .</b>		<b>48</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Female, . . .</b>		<b>31</b>	<b>3</b>	
<b>Idiocy from Birth, . . .</b>	<b>5</b>			
<b>Male, . . .</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	

Fig. 4. “Classification with reference to kind of Insanity” from the 1837 *Fourth Annual Report of the Trustees of the State Lunatic Asylum at Worcester* (Greene, Kinnicutt, Mann, Washburn, and Thompson 38)

The hospital also kept an individualized ledger, classifying admittees by the “supposed cause” of their insanity (Greene, Kinnicutt, Mann, Washburn, and Thompson 27). The hospital

body became knowable through the kinds of ailing bodies that composed it—discrete “kinds” of people who could be identified, counted, and sorted (see also Farrell; Hacking, “Biopower”). The causes for insanity supplied on these ledgers provide us a useful glimpse into the protean character of insanity within the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical context Mann and Howe were steeped in: On another of the *Fourth Annual Report*’s tables, we find that the listed causes for insanity not only included “Intemperance,” but also “Fear of Poverty,” “Masturbation,” “Idiocy,” and “Hard Study” (Greene, Kinnicutt, Mann, Washburn, and Thompson 27). Improper education was, quite literally, a medical class of insanity at the time Mann entered the highest educational office in the state.

The novelty of the tabular rhetoric found in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” is that it marries and remixes these familiar forms of anatomo-political and bio-political display. This new instrument of *inwardly displaying the student body* applied the anatomizing attention of the former with the population-level focus of the latter, configuring the cohort of students attending a school into one aggregate student body, and opening up that corporate body for public inspection. Suggestively, the closest parallel for this new educational display of the group-level body might be phrenological displays of group-level racial differences, like those found in Samuel George Morton’s 1839 race scientific best-seller *Crania Americana*. This text presented readers with the cranial measurements of hundreds of individual skulls (with each skull classified by race), and also displayed the average measurements of each racial group’s skulls to account for the imagined particularities and abilities of different racial bodies (see, e.g., fig. 5 below). This text would certainly been one that Mann and Howe were acquainted with, both because of its popularity and because their mentor—George Combe—penned a lengthy appendix for it, explaining the phrenological science behind racial differences in temperament and capacity.

Mann would sometimes even reference Morton when giving lectures (see “Liberty” [Part 1] 1).

In at least this way, the 1845 common school examinations bore a striking resemblance to Morton’s tables: Like them, the daguerreotype likenesses generated by the 1845 writing assessments used written examination data to manufacture group portraits of a sort: a snapshot of the corporate school body, fashioned out of individual student writings. This form of human accounting, with its prioritization of school-level *countability*, served the social aim of advancing *accountability*.

	Toltecan nations, including skulls from the mounds.		Barbarous nations, with skulls from the Valley of Ohio		American Race, embracing the Toltecan and barbarous nations.		Flathead tribes of Columbia river.		Ancient Peruvians.	
	No. of skulls.	MEAN.	No. of skulls.	MEAN.	No. of skulls.	MEAN.	No. of skulls.	MEAN.	No. of skulls.	MEAN.
Longitudinal diameter.	57	6.5	90	7.	147	6.75	8	6.7	3	6.8
Parietal diameter.	57	5.6	90	5.5	147	5.55	8	6.	3	5.
Frontal diameter.	57	4.4	90	4.3	147	4.35	8	4.9	3	4.2
Vertical diameter.	57	5.3	90	5.4	147	5.35	8	4.8	3	4.8
Inter-mastoid arch.	57	14.9	90	14.6	147	14.75	8	14.6	3	13.3
Inter-mastoid line.	57	4.1	90	4.2	147	4.15	8	4.1	3	4.
Occipito-frontal arch.	57	13.6	90	14.2	147	13.9	8	13.1	3	14.3
Horizontal periphery.	57	19.4	90	19.9	147	19.65	8	20.	3	18.8
Length of head and face.	53	7.8	78	8.1	131	7.45	8	8.3	3	8.4
Zygomatic diameter.	49	5.3	64	5.3	113	5.3	8	5.7	3	5.1
Facial angle.	55	75° 35'	83	76° 13'	138	75° 45'	8	69° 30'	3	67° 20'
Internal capacity in cubic inches.	57	76.8	87	82.4	144	79.6	8	79.25	3	73.2
Capacity of the anterior chamber.	46	‡32.5	73	34.5	119	33.5	8	32.25	3	25.7
Capacity of the posterior chamber.	46	‡43.8	73	48.6	119	46.2	8	47.	3	47.4
Capacity of the coronal region.	46	‡14.	71	16.2	117	15.1	8	11.9	3	14.6
Capacity of the sub-coronal region.	46	‡61.8	71	66.5	117	64.5	8	67.35	3	58.6
The total capacity being estimated at 100, gives the following proportionate results as parts of 100.										
		42.6		41.5		42.1		40.63		35.1
		57.4		58.5		60.		59.37		64.9
		18.47		19.6		19.		15.		20.
		81.53		80.4		81.		85.		80.

Fig. 5. “Mean Results” of Cranial Measurements from Morton’s 1839 *Crania Americana* (259).

In the common school reformers’ tabular displays, we find the translation of invisible student qualities into visible, self-consciously visual media—giving material *form* to patterns of performance, so that they can be discerned by the eye in the first place. “Universally, an examination is now understood to be an *assaying* of the value of the school,” Mann observed



(“Ninth Report” 92, emphasis in original). This assaying process terminates in a public presentation, which communicates the value schools have been found to have. Look to the tables, and we find each school reduced to a small set of discrete features—each of which is, itself, reduced to a number. While we could say the tables represent Boston’s Grammar and Writing Schools, it would be more precise to say that they re-create and re-present these common schools, reifying the qualitative value of each as a *numerical* value—an ailing, disorderly body in need of expert care and reform. As a key element of the “extraordinary degree of importance” he ascribes to the 1845 examination results (“Boston” 290), Mann cites “the labor and care expended in reducing the results of the examination to a *tabular form*, so that the common eye can compare them, and determine at a glance the relative standing of each school” (289, emphasis mine).

Determining the “relative standing” of each school was a way to assign blame to instructors “at a glance,” because such a comparison would draw visual attention to the lowest performing schools—and, thereby, the school masters most accountable for the mechanizing errors scoring student writing. Returning to the “Grammar” examination table above (fig. 3), we get a sense for how accountability at a glance was imagined to function. In the leftmost column, each of the schools examined are listed alphabetically; each column along that row, displaying the numbers that compose those corporate bodies: their comparative sizes (in the form of students enrolled in those tested), ages, and the scores of error that mark them. Set off from the rest of the schools ranked, the Dudley School in surrounding Roxbury, Massachusetts was included at the bottom of the tables as a kind of control group, “a ‘fair sample’ of the ‘best schools’ of the same grade out of the city” against which the Boston city schools could be visually compared (H. Mann, “Boston” 346). The comparison of these bodies was not a flattering

one. Somewhere between astonished and apoplectic, Mann exclaimed that while Boston city schools were considerably better-funded, “the average rank of the Boston schools is not quite one half that of the Dudley School!”

That the ultimate fault for student failures rests at the feet of teachers was, Mann felt, a matter of no small rhetorical significance. This location of blame, Mann adds in his August 29<sup>th</sup> letter to Howe, “is very important to a just view of the case, as it regards the committee. If the odium of such a disclosure”—that is, student underperformance on the examination—“is to fall upon the children, the parents will be disposed to punish you for it. If on the other hand, it can be fastened where it belongs, they will condemn the teachers both from motives of justice, and philoprogenitiveness” (Horace Mann to Samuel Gridley Howe, 29 Aug. 1845; cf. Madaus 23-24). Framing the image generated by examination was of paramount importance. Sensitivity to audience motivated Mann to table his talk of hereditary degeneration and student deficiency in favor of incriminating pedagogy over parentage (or parenting). After all, if the classroom was to provide any meaningful corrective to the trend-line of human history, it needed to expand the intellects of all its charges, regardless of their initial abilities.

As Mann notes, casting his rhetorical calculations in a phrenological vocabulary, such a maneuver appeals not only to *justice*—a sentimental outgrowth of “conscientiousness,” deemed by Combe to be a higher mental faculty “*proper to Man*” (*Constitution* 56, emphasis in original)—but appeals also to a lower mental faculty, shared by human and beast alike: philoprogenitiveness, the faculty phrenologists believed to motive care for (and coddling of) offspring (see, e.g., Combe, *Constitution* 51-76). Mann, though, is not counting on philoprogenitiveness to carry the day. Examination itself provided the persuasive machinery necessary to sway public sentiment in favor of reform, in part, by displaying the student body

and the errors scoring it, for the common eye of the public to see. This comparability, Mann tells Howe in his August 29<sup>th</sup> letter, provides the evidentiary basis necessary to saddle specific school masters with responsibility for failures on the examinee's page: "One very important and pervading fact in proof of this view of the case, is, on the same subject, showing that the children could learn, if the teachers had taught" (Horace Mann to Samuel Gridley Howe, 29 Aug. 1845).

In a real sense, for Mann, writing on the page is only a second-order form of writing, externalizing the marks teachers have made in their students' minds. Written examination makes possible the comparison of the quality of these marks by constructing durable, comparable bodies of data: archives of error and ability, serving as markers of pedagogical participation in either cultural progress or regress, and making accountability assignable at a glance. Yet there is more at work in these tabular displays than might initially meet the "common eye," as Mann called it. To grapple with the imagined affordances of this visual rhetoric of score reporting, we must examine the full picture it provided the public: a complex, gut-wrenching visualization of the shameful state of the common school classroom, framed to shape popular sentiment. On offer in these tabular displays is a radically deficit-based account of students and their schools—the student body, stripped of virtually all features, save for its putative deficiencies.

### **Displaying the Student Body**

These inward tabular displays do more than show us how Boston's schools stacked against one another, or against nearby Dudley. They painstakingly and painfully expose to the common eye the errors marking each school's student body. If written examination is intended to externalize pedagogical inscriptions in the mind for outside scrutiny, the error-filled tables featured in "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" completes this project, pooling and publicly

displaying these inward errors in instruction. Each re-rendered the corporate student body as an aggregated body of data, in order to recreate for the public eye the horror Mann's inward eye witnessed in Boston's common schools. As he and his Examining Committee colleagues imagined it, quantification was anything but a coldly rational mode of representing the inner classroom world. Tabular displays of the student body were intended to elicit an intense affective reaction in Boston's public—turning the stomach, so as to turn the course of public opinion. In its rhetoric of display, the 1845 written examinations provided a sentimental technology for fanning the flames of public fury. Through this pathetic appeal, countability was believed to make accountability possible and reform palatable.

Displays, Lawrence J. Prelli reminds us, are always tendentious and rhetorical, in that “whatever is revealed through display simultaneously conceals alternative possibilities” (2). *Partial* in more than one sense of that term, displays are inflected with the motives and worldviews they emerge within; what they “make manifest or appear as the culmination of selective processes that constrain the range of possible meanings available to those who encounter them” (2). Even a cursory read of the 1845 written examination table columns gives an indication of the constraints favored by Mann and his colleagues. Excepting those columns that capture general data about the examined school and student examinees—specifically, the total number of students, number of students examined, proportion of students examined, and age of those examined—*every* column and data point displays something about the shortcomings exposed by the examinations.

Written responses are recreated in these tables as an assortment of errors that, like so many “eyesores” (Siebers 69-71), are intended to aesthetically assault common viewers, simulating for them what Mann's inward eye saw in the responses of those examined: failures in

mental culture that could recapitulate themselves as physical disability, disease, or disfigurement. The daguerreotype likenesses of the individual student mind and the collective student body are, like photography itself (see, e.g., Cartwright; Dolmage; Sekula), eugenic media that screen for—and make legible—ostensible defects in development. Errors on the page index errors in the minds that composed them and, at a greater remove, externalize the errors in the pedagogic inscriptions made in students' minds. The rhetoric of display operant in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” is a rhetoric of defects and deficiencies. Error is carefully classified and displayed—with the multiple, overlapping flaws exposed to an onlooking public.

Returning and to the “Grammar” examination results table (fig. 3 above), let us look to the sixth column from the left: Scanning from left to right, we are supplied with the total number of correct answers given by students, followed first by the total number “of correct answers there would have been had all the scholars answered correctly,” and *then* by the total number of incorrect answers given by students at that school. In the first of these three columns, we are given the image of local correctness; in the second, an idealized image to compare the first unfavorably with; and third, a photonegative of the first, capturing student errors, and aiding readers in seeing how student failures compare with successes—where the errors are as (or more) numerous than correct responses. Eager to impress upon readers the “enormity” of student failure, the Grammar School Examining Committee makes note of their own merciful self-restraint when appraising student answers. However dismal and “surprising” the errors of the tabulated student body, “They would . . . have been more so, had we rigidly adhered to the rules of criticism, and set down every answer as incorrect which was not faultless; but we have put the most lenient construction upon the answers, and whenever it appeared that the scholar had any

tolerable idea of the subject, we have recorded his answer as correct” (293). Rest assured, the Committee tells us, that Boston’s student bodies are displayed in the most positive possible light.

When we move beyond these three columns, error proliferates. Each of the next three columns documents a category of *usage* error in student writing—Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar, respectively. These formal errors are registered *in addition* to the count of incorrect answers recorded by the Examining Committees. This way, a student response judged to be substantively incorrect, in addition to including multiple mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and grammar, would find itself represented in the table a corresponding number of times. As we have seen in the preceding section, each species of surface-level error was imagined to testify to a deeper failure at the level of student habits, and the motivational strategies that led to their formation. Abutting these three columns is yet another classification of error: the number of questions students failed to complete. While still signaling a kind of failure in mental culture and racial progress, the presence of “questions not answered” seems to have represented, for the Examining Committees, a more honest—and therefore less objectionable—species of error than those located in content or usage. In visualizing the absence of student errors, the Examining Committees are doing more than scrupulously teasing apart and tracking every permutation of error they imagined to be different. They are providing, they insist, an aperture through which failures in student moral development can be seen.

While incorrectly answered questions signaled intellectual underdevelopment (each error on the examination corresponding to a failure in mental culture), Mann and his colleagues were disturbed by the fact that students unequipped to respond correctly attempted an answer at all. Examination was intended to disclose student failings. Mann felt that, “Every pupil should be made clearly to see, and deeply to feel, . . . that no arts or devices are to be made use of, either to

conceal his ignorance or to display his knowledge; that his mind will be submitted for inspection, not on its bright side only, but on all sides” (“Ninth Report” 90). Student efforts to conceal the condition of their mental culture was tantamount to deceit, compounding intellectual failure with moral failure. Detailing what they call a “painful reflection forced upon the mind” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 298), the Grammar School Examining Committee argues this point, sorrowfully relating to readers

that while in some Schools the scholars seem to be conscientious, and do not answer questions about which they are ignorant; in others they appear to be perfectly reckless, and put down answers quite at hazard, in the hope of hitting upon something that may pass for an answer. This shows an *habitual* carelessness in giving answers, or a want of that nicely-trained conscientiousness, which deters from *trying to appear what one is not*. (qtd. in Mann, “Boston” 299, emphasis mine)

Echoing this sentiment, Mann heightens the contrast between incorrectly answered questions and questions not answered, classing only the first as true error: “We might name two or three of the schools, where, though there was not a great number of correct answers, there were but comparatively few incorrect ones;—doubtless because the scholars had been led to perceive, that *ignorance*, bad as it is, is not so bad as an *error*; and that cheating by false *pretences* is as inexcusable in regard to *knowledge* as it is in *trade*” (“Boston” 361, emphasis in original).

Rounding out the scopic potential of the 1845 written examinations, the category of questions not answered—when cross-referenced against the number of questions answered incorrectly—provided insights into moral underdevelopment and deviancy, another axis along which race degeneration might travel (see Chapters 3 and 6).

Looking back to the table for the “Grammar” portion of the Grammar School examination (fig. 3), we find that the profiles of both the Otis and Smith schools match this description of ignorance crowding out incorrect responses. The former student body is marked with 33 incorrectly answered questions and 207 unanswered ones, and the latter is marked with

only 5 incorrectly answered questions, with 104 left unanswered. We need not travel far on the tables to see how little this moral victory means, when it is unaccompanied by the presence of correct answers. The next (and final) two columns following “No. of questions not answered” calculate the total value of the school in two ways, displaying the “Per centage of correct answers” and then “Relative rank of the school,” respectively. The Otis and Smith schools, while aligned in having grossly more unanswered questions than incorrectly answered ones, were found not to be of comparable developmental value or standing—owing to the different percentages of correct answers overall.

Despite its large number of errors, Otis’s student body correctly answered 43 questions (of a possible 294, had all its 21 examinees answered questions correctly), meaning that it could claim a correctness level of 15%. Smith, sadly, fared worse—indeed, the worst of all schools examined. The Smith student both answered only 3 questions correctly (of a possible 112, had all 8 of its examinees completed their tests perfectly). Its overall level of correctness was an appalling 3%; it was assigned the lowest ranking of all Boston’s schools, with Otis trailing close behind. Smith’s underperformance did not go unremarked on by the Examining Committees or by Mann himself. All thought Smith, the public school serving Boston’s black population, exemplary of the need for common school reform—a topic the next chapter is devoted to exploring.

When we look to each table published in the *Common School Journal*, what we find is that Boston’s schools are recreated as a body of errors—editorially intended by Mann to elicit a visceral aesthetic response and, in doing so, pique public interest in reform. Tabulation freezes and displays the collective student body, just as the written examination arrests and displays the individual student mind. These tables furnished the Boston public with daguerreotype likenesses



of that portion of the new race entrusted to each school. Mann located the persuasive potential of tabulation largely in its *aesthetic* potential. “Aesthetics,” Tobin Siebers teaches us, “tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” (1), such that to speak of “aesthetics” is to speak of “the body and its affective sphere” (2).

Mann and his colleagues intended their report on Boston’s student bodies to elicit shock, outrage, and disgust—their defects and deficiencies concretized for sensory consumption and exposed to the common eye. Pointing periodically to the tables as positive proof, Mann and his colleagues repeatedly characterize the condition of the common schools as abject and “deplorable” (“Boston” 299, 351, 357, 363), and affirm that the reports provide a “*painful* superabundance of proof” that students have received inadequate “indoctrination into principles” (351). That the Dudley School can be seen as superior to Boston’s city schools is—we learn, in order—a “*startling* result,” an “*astounding* fact,” and a “*sad* result” (346, emphases mine). Mann assures of the Grammar School report, specifically, that it “leaves no doubt of the *humiliating* fact” of the school-and-student failure: That fact “has filled the intelligent citizens of Boston ... with *amazement* and *grief*” (344, emphasis mine).

The tables provide the common eye its point of access to the inward failure of the schools—the ability to know their deplorable state at a glance, and to feel acutely the pain and humiliation of their inferior standing. Siebers has described this kind of visceral, judgmental reaction to abjected bodies as an “aesthetics of disqualification,” reminding us that, “The representation of inferiority always comes back to the appearance of the body and the way the body makes other bodies feel” (26). Mann makes no secret that the Reports he reproduces in the *Common School Journal* represent a visceral, emotional appeal. Relating their effects, Mann writes, “That the facts disclosed by the Reports, have spread through the city a general and deep

feeling of *sorrow* and *mortification*, no one will be so presumptuous as to deny. Sad indeed would it be, if this feeling should die away without producing a reform” (“Boston” 344, emphasis mine).

Perhaps concerned that his fixation on common school failures might seem to readers cruel or ghoulish, Mann defensively explains that exposure of the student body is a dismal matter of duty he took no delight in, protesting that, “We have no wish to *blazon abroad the defects* of these schools; but if this occasion should not be made use of, for admonition and warning, the calamity of their present condition would not only be gratuitously suffered, but it might be perpetuated for years to come” (“Boston” 344). In blazoning student defects—displaying them for the common eye—Mann sought to provide an apotropaic service for the racial health and hygiene of the new race of children in Boston’s common schools, warding off future defects by exciting popular passions to present intervention. Luckily, these students were still young and developmentally pliable—still in the formative care of the common school. These students might be a new race “scored all over with errors,” but Mann held out hope that there was still time for these inner defects to be corrected or overwritten—that with proper school reform, the race need not wait another generation to begin once more.

Mann’s promotion of score reporting was, in this way, a crucial technology of social justice reform, advancing the imagined moral aim of progress that guided his phrenological interventions in writing education. Its practical goals were ones we might find ourselves endorsing as unproblematically good: Mann and his colleagues advocated an end to beating children as a way to motivate them. They also resisted the idea that success in the classroom ought to be a competition, with peer pitched against peer. The arcane moral architecture subtending those goals seems to have been too obscure or inconvenient for existing

historiography to reckon with: fear and emulation are undesirable motive-powers because they fail to promote adequate mental exercise to the student body, risking racial underdevelopment. Mann's assessment-rhetoric is ecologically complex, advancing material benefits and improved treatment for students *as well as* an ideology that regards them as suspect and error-scored—and that charts the course of goodness against the moral horizon of eugenic race betterment. In the accountability assessment-rhetoric of the 1845 examinations, racist fantasies of progress cohabited with and animated attempts at social justice reform—including school reforms we might today applaud.

The revolutionary moral promise introduced by the school reformers' brand of score reporting was this: count error and hold schools accountable. The new nation needed better writers and better race-writers. The future of the United States depended on it. Indeed, this future seems perpetually to be at stake, if the steady stream of accountability rhetoric in education since Mann's death is to be believed. Crisis of some kind is never far away, and assessment never ceases to promise a better world beyond it. The 1845 examinations provide a powerful reminder and warning that if we are asking ourselves only whether an assessment instrument is an accurate witness, faithfully reporting student performance, we are asking a necessary question, but an insufficient one. It is not enough to attend only to the precision and robustness of a test, or the material outcomes it promotes for students, without also closely considering the fantasies and rationales underwriting them. Dangerous ideologies can have afterlives no less significant than the beneficial reforms they helped initially to shape. The peril of assessment is that it seems never to be simple; acknowledging and excavating its complexities is one way we can work to avoid being ensnared in them. In response to even our most ostensibly "good" invocations of

assessment-based accountability, the moral questions we ask must include: What future we are counting *on*—and counting *for*?

## CHAPTER 4

### Students' Right to Their Own Colonization:

#### Fairness, Segregation, and the Exceptional Failure of Boston's Smith School Writers

*I believe that we still haven't really begun the conversations about equity. We have railed against cultural literacy, but we are still colonial schools. The schools of the colony tend to have curricula that aim at achieving cultural assimilation, a limited assimilation, an assimilation that best serves the needs of those who hold power. (Villanueva "Maybe a Colony" 188)*

Holding a mirror up to the writing classroom, Victor Villanueva sees the reflection of the United States' colonialist history. Even when not visibly segregated into an "apartheid" zone like the basic writing classroom (Shor; Prendergast "Race" 36; cf. Greenberg), students of color can find themselves occupying a disfavored position within racially stratified space—particularly if their language or dialect performances depart from the putatively standard (white) varieties of writing that are routinely privileged in composition instruction. True, writing educators have been willing to publicly disavow racism, and to just as publicly proclaim, cosign, or reaffirm the idea of a "Students' Right to Their Own Language"—supporting the notion that students ought not be minoritized or penalized due to "the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" (National Council of Teachers of English 2).

But these abstract, public proclamations do not always translate into concrete, private assessment practices; the unstated preferences that animate the colonial classroom seem somehow to survive our stated commitments to the contrary. Within such classroom spaces,

students of color remain “internally colonized”: positioned as deviant, alien, and other, unless they assimilate to the language and culture of those in power—and perhaps positioned in this way even after doing so (Villanueva, “Maybe” 187-8). “Assimilation is cultural flattening,” Villanueva warns, “And even when assimilation is achieved, full participation still tends to be denied the internally colonized” (188). Within the racist ecology of the colonial classroom, the trace of racial difference is a durable and damning inscription. And this inscription is read *in* and *alongside* students’ classroom writings—shaping and shaped by acts of assessment. The conversation about equity in writing assessment must begin here, if we are really going to have it.

Attempting to meet this challenge, the recent social justice turn in writing assessment scholarship (e.g., Elliot, “Theory”; Inoue, *Antiracist*; Poe and Inoue; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*) has brought needed attention to the impacts of assessment on student subpopulations, exchanging the field’s racially color-blind lens for one that brings race and racism into focus (Behm and Miller; Inoue, “Technology”; Inoue and Poe). Much of this work has proceeded under the banner of *fairness* in writing assessment—that is, attention to the propriety and consequences of assessment, particularly as they relate to different student subpopulations. An increasingly prominent commonplace within the field, *fairness* has been forwarded as a new guiding principle for assessment, subsuming or replacing the concept of *validity*—the idea that an assessment actually “measures what it purports to (i.e. is supposed to) measure” (Newton and Shaw 33).

“Fairness,” Norbert Elliot claims, “is the first virtue of assessment” (“Theory” §1.0); branching from the tree of Rawlsian justice theory, Elliot defines a fair writing assessment as one that maximizes opportunities and benefits to “the least advantaged” (§3.0). As the concept has

come to figure within the field, *fairness* can assume the forms of equity, equality, or both; yet primacy is invariably placed on the first of these terms, such that equality can be sacrificed when it is deemed a barrier to equity. “Judging everyone by the same standard is not an inherently fair practice in a writing classroom,” Asao Inoue insists (*Antiracist* 56). In this skepticism toward “sameness” and mechanically applied “standards” can be heard the heartbeat of the field’s turn to fairness: If writing assessment is to offer students something other than a colonial classroom, it must somehow honor racial differences by taking them into account, rather than flattening them or assimilating them away.

As it happens, questions of race and fairness in assessment, while a departure from dominant writing assessment discourse of the past few decades, are hardly new. They have been an important part of writing assessment from the start, figuring prominently in the *Common School Journal* article “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” as key components of the commentary accompanying the landmark 1845 written examinations. While racial difference and deviance are at the core of Horace Mann’s educational agenda, and non-white racial bodies appear regularly in his writings, Mann typically anchors his attention on intraracial differences within the body he variously calls “the white race” (*Slavery* 130), “the Caucasian race” (“Letter of Horace” 68), and “the free white population of the United States” (“Sixth Report” 154). Accordingly, up to this point, we have principally discussed the 1845 written examinations as an imagined means of promoting *white* racial progress. This chapter adds a new dimension to this discussion, expanding its focus to include a second racial body targeted by the 1845 examinations. As we will find, “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” departs from the bulk of Mann’s other writings by devoting significant attention to the written performance and

educational development of non-white students in the form of Boston's *Abiel Smith School*, an institution "set apart for the instruction of colored children" (qtd. in H. Mann, "Boston" 290).

Mann's famous "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" article provides not only "the first formal discussion" of written examination (Lynne 19), but *also*, remarkably, the first formal discussion of racial disparities and inequities in writing assessment, in the form of devastating commentary on the failures of the Smith School. "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" drew on written examination data to excoriate the Smith student body for its manifold intellectual and moral errors, publicizing them as a warning of the depths to which poorly managed common schools could descend. "The attainments of the [Smith] scholars are of the lowest grade," reports the Grammar School Committee (299). Mann and his examiner colleagues—all, white men—imagined themselves to be exposing a racist educational injustice: The Smith scholars were being denied a fair education by their school—or, more specifically, their school master, Abner Forbes.

On its face, the concern expressed by these reformers for the underperformance of the Smith student body might appear to represent a moment of unalloyed anti-racist activism. By all accounts, Mann and his colleagues imagined themselves as champions for an underserved student population—*fairness* for those they imagined to be least advantaged. The Grammar School Committee explicitly declares that their innovative adoption of writing assessment was intended to ensure Boston's students "have as fair an examination as possible" and to "give the same advantages to all," affording the city's students a more robust and accurate assessment than oral assessment allows for:

It was our wish ... to carry away not loose notes, or vague remembrances of the examination, but positive information, in black and white; to ascertain with certainty, what the scholars did not know, as well as what they did know; to test their readiness at expressing their ideas upon paper; to have positive and undeniable evidence of their



ability or inability to construct sentences grammatically, to punctuate them, and to spell the words. (qtd. in Mann, “Boston” 290-1; see also Reese 131)

Collecting this data “in black and white” was only the examiners’ first step. They then disaggregated data from their 1845 examinations of Boston’s common schools in order to expose racially disparate treatment or impact (cf. Poe and Cogan), interpreted that data in light of the city’s segregated social ecology, and publicized their findings in order to advocate for improved instructional conditions at Smith, “set apart” to support Boston’s black population.

At the same time, the reformers’ data analysis and use were necessarily knotted with their understandings of *who* Smith’s students were, as well as their understandings of *how* Smith’s written examination performance should be interpreted, and *what* developmental progress or “uplift” could and should look like for Smith’s student body as a result. For those of us committed to social justice in and through writing assessment, the 1845 examination of the Smith School provides an instructive microhistorical case, showing us how progressive efforts to promote fairness and opportunity to learn in education can be complicated or compromised by the racial assumptions, beliefs, and aims that underlie them. Putting fairness in historical relief in this way supplies us with a helpful reminder that fairness is a fundamentally rhetorical construct, with important—yet sometimes subtle, multiple, even contradictory—consequences for students.

To describe an assessment as “fair” (or, for that matter, “reliable” or “valid”) is to make a claim about its social qualities and meanings. And, as Inoue puts it, “fairness in any writing assessment ecology is not an inherent quality, practice, or trait that then allows us to claim an assessment is fair for everyone. ... Fairness is a construction of the ecology itself” (*Antiracist* 56). More pointedly, this chapter takes the 1845 examinations of the Smith School as a site for exploring an additional dimension of the rhetorical construction of fairness: How educators name and pursue fairness in assessment, what we “select” or “deflect” as fair and appropriate (cf.

Burke; Schiappa), ramifies into students' lives and opportunities. To talk of fairness or propriety in assessment is to define and delimit what we owe our students. Assessment-rhetorics of fairness advance assertions about what our students' rights are and about what we our responsibilities are to them.

The 1845 written examination responses of the Smith school students have not survived; all we know about this performance flows through the pens of their examiners, written in the ink of their racial prejudices. This gap in the archive deprives us of the opportunity to hear the Smith students' voices, yet—through those surviving examiner reports—it remains possible for us to do recovery work of another kind: unmasking and critiquing the racist ecology of actors and assumptions that, in 1845, conspired to devalue the Smith scholars' voices in the name of *fairness*. Through its close reconsideration of Smith's role in Mann's "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" article—and, in particular, the Smith School sub-report written by Samuel Gridley Howe and his supporting Grammar School examination committee—this chapter shows that writing assessment was complexly implicated in the racial politics of segregated schooling in the antebellum North, underwriting reforms for improving the Smith School and *also* assumptions about the racial difference and deviance of the black students attending Smith. Mann and his colleagues not only make no move to dislodge segregation, the 1845 examination reports also circulate concrete claims about enduring racial differences and, in doing so, tacitly support the idea that for common schooling in Boston to be equal, it must be separate.<sup>48</sup> The "daguerreotype likenesses" taken of Smith's student body have a more complex legacy than existing histories have acknowledged—their afterimages outlining multiple, even contradictory visions for racial progress, with complex implications for racial (in)justice.

Framing these interpretations of the Smith School examination data were two interrelated beliefs about colonization. First, that students of color developmentally benefit from what Villanueva calls “internal colonization”—being held out as deviant and required to internalize the (white) habits and knowledges privileged within the colonial order. Second, that racial segregation itself (as a mode of internal colonization) was developmentally beneficial for student bodies of color. These imagined benefits of segregated education, if realized, might result in a further, putatively desirable form of segregation, with black Americans voluntarily leaving the United States to *colonize another territory*—a policy goal often referred to simply as “colonization,” and that was popular within the abolitionist circles Mann and his colleagues traveled in. The idea that students of color had a right to their own languages, dialects, and writing practices would likely have struck Mann as absurd, even unintelligible. English—and “correct” English, as he understood it—was a language that developed the mind. English language writing was a technology of race-writing; to inscribe that language in the minds of students was not a violence, but an act of benevolent outreach to those Mann would have considered lower in the Great Chain of Being—races still developmentally in their childhood. Students had no right to their own language; they had a right to be inducted into a higher linguistic and intellectual order, with all its cultural trappings and habits of mind. The Smith students had a right to be benevolently colonized, and they had a right to their own colonization.

To begin understanding the complex, aporetic way the 1845 examinations pictured progress in the Smith School, it is important we train our critical attention not just on the numerical results portrayed in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” but also the assumptions about race, writing, and development that frame these results—assumptions laid bare in the sub-reports dedicated to Smith. In the sections that follow, I provide the first detailed engagement

with these sub-reports, modeling through this process the critical importance of deep engagements with the local interpretation and use of writing assessment data—resituating examination results within the ecology of assumptions that initially gave rise to them. To set the stage for this work, I begin by providing general background on the 1845 Smith School examinations and the earlier creation of the Smith School, before proceeding to discuss the messy beliefs about integration and colonization held by Mann and Howe—those primarily responsible for the creation and circulation of the Grammar School Examination Committee’s sub-report on Smith. From this stage we proceed to the Grammar School sub-report itself, re-examining its representation of Smith student failure and triangulating this representation with other texts written by Mann and by Howe. This analysis concludes with commentary on the aporetic logic guiding the 1845 examination of Smith—a logic that, in identifying the putatively “un-common” Smith school students as innately inferior, positions them as perpetually in developmental peril, always already in need of saving *and* beyond being truly saved.<sup>49</sup>

### **Black Bodies on the White Page: The Visible Sign of Reason**

Even before the United States was founded, Boston’s white citizenry subjected black writing to special scrutiny. In one infamous, well-documented episode, Phillis Wheatley was required in the spring of 1772 to present herself before “eighteen of Boston’s leading citizens” and receive a rigorous oral examination, designed to demonstrate something that, to these eminent (white) figures, strained credulity: Wheatley—then, enslaved by a Bostonian merchant—was a gifted writer, capable of composing original poetic works (Logan 1; also Gates 7-9; Warner). Having proved, to her examiners’ satisfaction, a rhetorical capacity for inventive writing, Wheatley was furnished with a letter of “Attestation,” signed by the committee of

eighteen, which certified the fact of her authorship—a credential needed by Wheatley to calm the violent skepticism of prospective white publishers, leading to the release of her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* the next year. The question of Wheatley’s writing ability was, Gates tells us, of special importance to political debates about slavery and philosophical/scientific debates about black personhood:

Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were “reasonable,” and hence “men,” [sic] if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of “the arts and sciences,” the eighteenth century’s formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is characterized by its foundation on man’s ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been “discovering” since the Renaissance. (8, emphasis in original)<sup>50</sup>

At stake when examining whether Wheatley could write was the question of whether Wheatley was truly and fully human—the answer to which raised, in the white colonialist mind, new questions about the morality of enslaving Wheatley, if not also of slavery generally.

Not for nothing, Wheatley’s successful examination and subsequent publication were accompanied, before long, by manumission papers signed by her (former) slaver (Gates 9). Intelligence and Americanness, citizenship and humanity were indexed by *writing*, the visible sign of reason. They were indexed by black bodies on the white page. From the earliest days of the American republic, the literate ability to write characters has been configured as a white “trait” or “property” (Prendergast, *Literacy* 8). Put differently, “Black illiteracy was more than a negation of literacy for blacks; it was the condition of a positive character of written discourse for whites” (Warner 12). Gates claims that, for Wheatley and others like her, composition “was not an activity of mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity” (9). But this characterization is missing a crucial component. It’s not just the case that Wheatley was writing for her life—her freedom and her future—but also that her fate was, at

several stages, placed in the hands of white examiners who imagined themselves fair judges of writing ability. Examiners who considered it a right and responsibility to sanction the composing abilities of people of color—or to write them off. Within the social ecology of colonial Boston, humanity was seemingly a matter settled by writing assessment.

A little over forty years later, Boston's elite set in motion a different kind of writing assessment for its black population—yet one no less implicated in racist discourses of development and humanness. Namesake of the white “merchant prince” Abiel Smith, whose 1816 bequest funded construction and maintenance of the institution (Levy and Philips 511; A. White 527), the *Abiel Smith School* provided segregated antebellum Boston a co-educational common school for the mental culture of its black population (see also Levesque). As Boston became a focal point for intense school reform efforts in the 1830s and 40s, this un-common common school attracted particular critical attention from school examiners and foreign dignitaries, including the visiting phrenological luminaries who toured the Northeast, spreading their secular gospel. In returning to the reports about Smith left behind by two of these visiting phrenologists—Johann Spurzheim and George Combe—we gain a sense for how race scripted even informal examinations made of the school, and also how different assumptions about racial difference and deviance—however slight—contributed to different interpretations of the Smith School's meaning and value.

Assessments of the Smith student body were inextricable from (sometimes unstated) assumptions about the racial character of that body—its qualities, its abilities, and its potentials. During his 1832 trip to Boston, taken in the last months of his life, Spurzheim made a point to stop at the Smith School, granting it “his especial attention” (Capen 24). No opponent of racial segregation, Spurzheim seems to have taken his visit to Smith as an opportunity to affirm the

wisdom of separate schooling that reflected what he considered to be natural mental hierarchies. Sizing up the Smith students' skulls, Spurzheim proclaimed "that [the faculties of] Individuality and Eventuality were strong in the negro children; the reflective faculties less, and the whole forehead, *in general*, smaller than in the whites. They will receive their first education as quick, if not quicker than the white; they can read and speak as well, but they will be deficient in the English High School" (qtd. in Capen 24, emphasis in original)—meaning, presumably, that these students will be deficient in the more advanced creative work of *writing*.<sup>51</sup> "This judgment," we are informed by Spurzheim's biographer, "was confirmed by the teachers" (24)

A few years later, Mann's phrenological mentor George Combe made the pilgrimage to Smith. Combe mentioned approvingly that Boston's common schools were "supported by assessment, and are free to every white child who chooses to attend," but was horrified that "colored children are educated separately" (*Notes* 102-3). "This practice serves to maintain that odious distinction of color which is so unbecoming in a country boasting of its Christian spirit," Combe objected (103; see also Reese 86). Combe was careful to note that he did not confuse the goal of legal equality with the fact of racial equality. Likening the character of Native Americans and African Americans to those, respectively, of wolves and dogs, Combe confides in readers his expert, phrenological conclusion that "[i]n both, the brain is inferior in size, particularly in the moral and intellectual regions, to that of the Anglo-Saxon race, and hence the foundation of the natural superiority of the latter over both" (*Notes* 260).

Combe's embrace of abolitionism and his comfort with racial integration seem to stem, in large part, from a belief that these were conditions necessary for black development or else extinction—either of which would represent, in his estimation, a fair and natural outcome. Holding it "a reasonable inference, that the greater exercise of the mental faculties in freedom

has caused the [African American] brain to increase in size” (*Notes* 280-1), Combe nevertheless thought that integration served a winnowing function, eradicating black bodies that were unfit for the rigors of free life:

the condition of the free Negroes, when they come into competition with the whites, is so unfavorable, that those of them in whom the brain is deficient in size, and the mental faculties weak, are overwhelmed with difficulties, and die out, and only the most vigorously constituted are able to maintain their position; and hence, that in the free states we see the highest specimens of the race. (*Notes* 281)

Perhaps, Combe figured, integration of Boston’s common schools would effect a similar eliminationist outcome: integrated schooling would more fully exercise the mind, while integrated social life would facilitate the natural extinction of those unfitted for freedom.

However famous Smith became among mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century phrenologists, Smith is far better remembered for its legal and political significance. Smith has the ignominious distinction of being at the center of the 1850 Massachusetts Supreme Court case *Roberts v. City of Boston*, in which plaintiff Sarah Roberts (a 5-year old Smith School student) challenged the legality of segregated education in Boston. Roberts’s legal representation argued strenuously that segregated education was psychologically damaging and socially humiliating. What’s more, Roberts was required to attend Smith despite the fact that she lived closer to several other common schools, which she had to pass on the way to Smith. Ruling against Roberts, the Court’s disastrous decision did more than prop up local segregated common schooling—it provided an early legal precedent for the “separate but equal” doctrine enshrined nationally by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Baltimore and Williams; Jacobs; Kendrick and Kendrick; Levesque; Levy and Philips). Writing five years before *Roberts v. City of Boston*, Mann and his examination committee colleagues considered the Smith School a catastrophe—though not, as we will find, because they objected to the horrors of educational segregation.



As we have seen, Mann believed the purpose of common schooling was to spur on evolutionary progress through pedagogical *race-writing*, with classroom instructions marking the minds of students in ways Mann believed heritable by future generations. Mental inscription through quality instruction would, the logic went, re-write and improve the race. Read against this backdrop, the Smith School captivated Mann and his colleagues as a symbol of race-writing failure—the flawed writings of Smith’s students, testifying to the failure of their teacher to rewrite and improve them. Smith’s entry in the “Index to Volume VII” of the *Common School Journal* provides a useful shorthand for the story Mann and his colleagues tell about that school: “Smith School, African, of Boston, low condition of” (388). The dismal performance of this school on the 1845 written examinations—even relative to the underperformance of the other schools discussed—is alluded to throughout “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools.” We learn from the Grammar School Examining Committee that, in terms of school performance on the “Geography” subject test, “the lowest, (*excluding the colored school*, where it was only 11,) was 18 per cent” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 346, emphasis mine); for performance on the “Grammar” subject test, “the lowest (*saving always the Smith School*,) was in the Otis” (298, emphases mine).

This failure would likely have been all the more dispiriting for Mann, considering he (like Combe) professed a belief in innate black intellectual inferiority—inferiority that formal education was intended to aid in overcoming. (Though unlike Combe, Mann favored segregation over integration, due to assumptions about education and racial development discussed in the next section.) Mann’s lengthiest commentary on the subject of black and white racial differences can be found in an 1851 letter he delivered to the Ohio Convention of Colored Freemen, which was soon republished in the abolitionist newspapers *The National Era* and *The Liberator*. In it,

Horace Mann endorsed what he took to be “the almost universal opinion ... that in intellect the blacks are inferior to the whites; while in sentiment and affection the whites are inferior to the blacks” (“Letter of Horace Mann” 68; see also Foner 247-9). Revealingly, Mann outlined in some detail what he took to be the “natural conditions” that distinguished the “colored population of the United States” from their white counterparts:

As compared with the Caucasian race, they are indeed supposed to be less inventive, to have less power for mathematical analysis, and less adaptation for abstruse investigations generally, are less enterprising, less vigorous, and are less defiant of obstacles. But, on the other hand, there is great unanimity in according to them a more cheerful, joyous, and companionable nature, greater fondness and capacity for music, a keener relish for whatever, *in their present state of development*, may be regarded as beauty, and more quick, enduring, and exalted religious affections. (“Letter of Horace Mann” 68, emphasis mine)

In this passing reference to developmental state, Mann seems offhandedly to slot the black race behind the white in the Great Chain of evolutionary progress. Presumably thinking himself magnanimous, Mann assures his Ohio audience of “colored freemen” that they are not so base or inferior as to deserve extermination, claiming “I think it neither probable nor desirable that the African race should die out, and leave that part of the earth to which they are native or indigenous, to the Caucasian or any other of the existing races” (68).

Of other races, Mann is not so certain. Comparing them to weeds and invasive pest species, Mann continues,

there are tribes of the human family, *whose existence we may not wish to see continued*, provided, always, that they dwindle and retire in a natural way, and without the exercise of violence or injustice to expel them from the earth. But writers on the characteristics of the different races of men, ascribe to the African many of the most desirable qualities belonging to human nature. (emphasis mine; see also Tomlinson 272)

The power dynamic implied in this scene of racial assessment would have been all too familiar to Phyllis Wheatley. Sources that Mann trusts have vouched for the value of black lives, their continued existence sanctioned by acts of expert *writing*. But underpinning this paternalistic

“ascription” of racial worth to the black body is a threat of violence. Mann re-voices the judgment of white examiners as a way of testifying to black humanity and worth—properties *tested* and *attested* to by experts—but in doing so, Mann aligns himself with the 18 patriarchs presiding over Wheatley, reinforcing the dehumanizing idea that black humanity is contingent on white approbation. In Mann’s account, other (unnamed) races are not so lucky, and—in the absence of an expert’s pardon—he summarily writes them off. It is this backdrop of racial examination, (de)humanization, and violence that frame writing instruction and assessment at the Smith School.

### **Segregation and Colonization**

At this early moment in writing assessment history, the Smith School was treated by Mann and his colleagues as doubly *exceptional*. As the school reserved for Boston’s black student population, Smith was racially cordoned off from the rest of the city’s public education apparatus. The writings of the Smith students marked them in an additional way for the 1845 examiners, so much so that the Smith student body comes to figure in their reports paralitically. Examiners often mention Smith only to remind readers that the school’s failure went without saying: “Saving always the Smith school...” In the minds of Mann and his examiner colleagues, the exceptional failure of the Smith students’ compositions and the exceptional character of the school’s racial composition were linked. From the first, the Examining Committees interpreted the Smith scholars’ performance as a sign of racial capacity and development, struggling not with the question of whether black failure was a byproduct of black inferiority, but instead with how much even the most effective instruction could inscribe intelligence in the Smith student body, revising and improving its developmental course.

Taken as an avatar of educational failure by Mann and his examiner colleagues—and, by extension, a referendum on the question of black educability—the Smith School receives a level of critical attention unpaid to any other school in the 1845 examination reports. In their original, unabridged form, the reports written by the Grammar School and Writing School examination committees profile *each* school examined, briefly sketching their strengths, weaknesses, and remarkable features. Smith attracted more critical attention than any other school. The account dedicated to the exceptional Smith School in each of the original reports is around four times longer than the next longest school sub-report. Within the Grammar School report submitted by Samuel Gridley Howe, Theophilus Parsons, and Rollin H. Neale, the sub-report dedicated to Smith runs for 463 words; the next longest account (for Bowdoin School) is only 111 words. Similarly, for the Writing School report by William Brigham, J. I. T. Collidge, and Hiram A. Graves, the Smith School sub-report is 455 words—just shy of four times longer than the 122 word account provided for the Eliot School, the second longest account. When excerpting these original reports for republication in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” Mann excised all of the school-specific profiles—saving only the Smith School sub-report written by Howe, Parsons, and Neale, which Mann reproduces *in full*.

Before conducting its innovative final examination of Smith by printed questions in September 1845, the Committee sent a representative in July to conduct a preliminary three-hour *oral* examination of Smith—the method of assessment used by past Examining Committees. Apparently, Howe had originally been slated to proctor the examinations with one of his lieutenants on the committee, the Baptist minister and abolitionist Rollin H. Neale, but Howe failed to attend, leaving the task for his junior colleague to undertake alone (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845). What we know about this first round of examinations

survives only in a letter Neale sent to Howe, documenting impressions of the Smith scholars' performance.<sup>52</sup> When it came time to compose his final, formal Committee Report—the report Mann recirculates in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools”—Howe seems to have entirely ignored Neale's preliminary examination, relying instead on a detailed error analysis of the daguerreotype likenesses the committee collected from the Smith students' writings. Perhaps because it was first ignored by Howe and Mann, Neale's letter has been similarly ignored by historians—yet when we revisit this account with an attention to assessment rhetoric, we begin to get a clearer sense for how assumptions about race constrain the Examining Committee's analysis of student performance and condition their understandings of what fairness in assessment means.

Commencing at 8 o'clock on the morning of July 10, 1845, Neale confronted the Smith scholars with progressively challenging questions, and recorded his impressions of their abilities. In his report to Howe, Neale does not make clear whether he required the Smith students to answer orally, or to write their responses—what he does make clear is that he regarded the Smith School as a scene of abject mental desolation. “The first thought that struck me on looking round upon the school,” Neale confesses, “was that which occurred to the Prophet [Ezekiel] when carried out in to the valley which was full of bones: He asked despairingly, ‘Can these dry bones live?’” (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845). Waxing Biblical in this way, Neale seems to regard the Smith scholars as intellectually lifeless—mental skeletons to be brought to life only by miraculous intervention. He reported that these students evidenced a “marked deficiency” in the fields of Geography and History, and to capture his stinging judgment of their performance on the natural philosophy subtest, Neale borrowed his phrasing from of Robert Pollok's poem “The Course of Time”: “The word philosophy / they never

heard...” (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845). Like a clinical phrenologist, running his fingers along an anthropologically unfamiliar skull, Neale traced the lineaments of the Grammar subtest answers he was given, divining in them the shape of the Smith scholars’ mental faculties. “In grammar,” he reports, “their answers were confined entirely to the *power of memory*, nor was this remarkably capacious” (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845).

Even successful student performance is read against the grain of Neale’s assumptions about black evolutionary development, which he expects to be both dismal and static—with black bodies across the globe, and across time, unified in their lack of mental culture, or their incapacity for it. With a kind of amused, paternalistic shock, Neale finds himself extending qualified praise to the Smith scholars: “In reading and spelling, though it could not be expected they would comprehend what they read much better than the *Ethiopian of old*, yet on the whole they acquitted themselves in these branches very creditably” (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845, emphasis mine). Filtering this examination data through the interpretative prism of his racial prejudices, Neale judges that the intellectual state of the Smith student body is “deficient” in virtually every respect, but that the Smith scholars are, nevertheless, being provided a fair education. The school master and those helping him run the school “do the best they can in the circumstances of the case,” Neale sympathizes—circumstances that evidently include his students’ hereditary underdevelopment, and the fact the students are “evidently a hard set to deal with” (Rollin H. Neale to Samuel Gridley Howe, 10 July 1845).

By the time the Grammar Committee collected, analyzed, and interpreted the Smith School’s final written examination performance, later that year, Howe had—in collaboration with Mann—arrived at a different conclusion about what fairness at Smith required. Smith’s

students, they determined, were not well-served by the instruction they were receiving, and race was a factor in this instructional failure. As will be discussed in greater detail in the sections of this chapter to follow, this alternative conclusion was not the result of a higher level of student success on their final written examinations. The Grammar Committee's final report found the Smith scholars' performance to be, if anything, *lower* than Neale's initial report indicates. These data take on different meanings in the Grammar School report because both Howe and Mann believed Boston's black student body was more susceptible to race-writing than did Neale, who expected the black race to remain developmentally frozen in time, the Smith student of today little different from the "Ethiopian of old." Powered by a new set of assumptions about black racial development—namely, those shared by Howe and Mann—this final report breathed new and different life into the data collected at Smith. To be sure, the final report admits that the Smith student body may be racially underdeveloped, even radically so, yet Mann and Howe believed this exceptional failure was largely authored by Smith's white schoolmaster: Abner Forbes.

Before even release of the 1845 Examining Committee reports, unseating Forbes had become a *cause célèbre* for Boston's education reform advocates. Writing to the Reverend Samuel J. May in a letter on Independence Day, 1845, Mann admits that "Howe has asked me several times whether I thought you to be so devoted to the cause of practically improving the condition of the colored people, that you would come to Boston and take the Smith School; for the general opinion is that F[orbes] must go" (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 239). The preceding year, anonymous reports had begun to circulate about Forbes's brutal reliance on corporal punishment in the classroom, and before long, Forbes found himself in the crosshairs of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, the country's premier abolitionist newspaper.<sup>53</sup> Forbes's preferred

pedagogical strategy—literally *whipping* his black students into intellectual shape—was one Mann found worse than distasteful: the motive-power of fear stunted mental development, leaving (at best) a race of polished imbeciles in its wake. Race-writing of this kind, privileging the disciplinarian’s lash over the pedagogue’s pen, simply would not do. Forbes had proved himself an enemy to common school reform and impediment to evolutionary racial progress. If written examination was intended to shame Boston’s schoolmasters into compliance or dislodge them from authority, Forbes was one educator Mann hoped to examine out of the job. Unsurprisingly, then, the Grammar School Examining Committee assigns the bulk of the blame for the students’ intellectual and moral failings to Forbes, whom they charge with insufficient “faith in the desire of the colored population for the education of their children, and in the capacities of the children themselves” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 300).<sup>54</sup>

Mann’s vocal opposition to Forbes, coupled with his abolitionist sympathies and his militant support for the common school, might lead us to suspect that he was not only a champion of antebellum African American education, but also an opponent of segregation (cf. Beneke; H. Moss; Reese). In reality, Mann’s commitments were more complex. While it may be true, as Stephen Tomlinson points out, that “Mann did not support *state-enforced* separate schooling,” it is also the case that “he refused to speak out against segregation” (Tomlinson 288, emphasis mine). Hilary Moss characterizes Mann’s reticence as an outgrowth of political pragmatism: If Mann, like other (white) school reformers, “appeared indifferent to integration,” it was because he “likely feared that the integration issue would only taint the cause of school reform. No doubt he wished to avoid saddling such a worthy objective with an unpopular distraction” (162). These characterizations of Mann may credit him with too much indifference to segregation. On this count, Mann was avowedly not a disinterested party. We would probably



capture Mann's sentiments more accurately to claim that, while not such an ardent segregationist that he would have actively opposed school integration—were such a policy publicly and politically popular—Mann seemed to *prefer* segregation as a strategic and developmentally beneficial half-measure.

In fact, Mann championed segregation as an important evolutionary strategy for promoting African American development, claiming that the creation of segregated spaces to be “[a] condition, at present, nearly or quite as indispensable to the elevation of the colored people” as *education* itself (“Letter of Horace” 68). Looming in the background of this embrace of segregation was Mann's longstanding fascination with black *colonization*—the idea that developmental interests of both the black and white races in the United States would be best served by transplanting black Americans to a new territory they could colonize, segregated from those already claimed by white nations. In its way, this plan provided for segregation at scale, sealing the borders of American belonging, and allowing for a purer form of white nationalism than the evils of slavery had allowed. Black racial development, too, would proceed apace, without—the logic went—being slowed or stalled by competition with a more advanced race. “The colonization movement, in other words, reflected the belief that even a free environment could not elevate young Negroes to a position of equality with the whites,” Merle Eugene Curti finds (190).

From the earliest days of the American Republic, calls for colonization captured the imagination of the nation's white intellectual elite. The most famous early proposal can be found in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he details a plan “[t]o emancipate all slaves born after passing the act,” then to educate these free bodies “at the public expence [sic]” until they attain the intellectual maturity necessary to “be colonized to such place as the

circumstances of time should render most proper” (137-8). So-called “colonization societies” with large membership rolls roared to life in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the most accomplished of which was the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America (or the “American Colonization Society”), which successfully sponsored the founding of Liberia in the 1820s. Mann’s home state of Massachusetts was host to several such societies, including the Massachusetts Colonization Society and the Boston Young Men’s Colonization Society. Mann graced the latter of these with a public address on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1833, advising the group with legal and moral considerations in their efforts to be “humble instruments in effecting a beneficial revolution in the destiny of a large and unfortunate portion of the human race” (“Address of Mr. Mann” 18). Historians Harold Schwartz and James W. Trent Jr. have found that this same year, Samuel Gridley Howe penned an anonymous “Letter on Slavery” for *The New-England Magazine* decrying slavery and recommending colonization instead of integration after its abolition. Howe declared, “I would fling wide open the outlets for the exportation of the blacks; I would most heartily hold up my hand for an appropriation of part of the future surplus of the national revenue to remunerate planters for the manumission of their slaves, and their exportation to Africa” (“Letter on Slavery” 124; see also Schwartz, 150-51; Trent 75-7).<sup>55</sup>

The races, Mann and Howe believed, developed best when developing separately. In his 1851 letter to the Ohio Convention of Colored Freemen, Mann wondered aloud whether black Americans might benefit from leaving the country: “Under these natural conditions, may not the blacks develop as high a state of civilization as the whites? Or, what is perhaps the better question, may not independent nations of each race be greatly improved by the existence of independent nations of the other? I believe so” (“Letter of Horace” 68). To the extent segregation was an evil, Mann regarded it an exigent one, without which true equality would remain an

impossibility. The path forward was, for Mann, as clear as it was forked: Separation of the races increased the likelihood that one day, they might stand on more equal developmental footing. Horrified by the idea that black Americans might be forcibly ejected from the United States as a matter of policy, Mann nevertheless held out hope that enlightened African Americans would eventually self-deport, seeking refuge in Africa or in colonies of their own making (“Letter of Horace” 68). In the meantime, voluntary segregation within the United States would provide African Americans space to develop the skills and character necessary to overcome intergenerational underdevelopment, Mann reasoned. Without “the formation of communities by themselves,” they would be denied this opportunity to development or worse, habituate to regression or stagnation. “Scattered, or rather sprinkled, as they now are, among the whites, mostly engaged in occupations which are considered (however unjustly) to be subordinate and servile, the spirit of self-reliance and of an ambition for advancement is killed out. At least, it is not nourished, and, like anything also without nourishment, it does not grow.”

Within this framework for progress, Mann could be counted a booster for “separate but equal” common schooling, and seems to have objected to the Smith School expressly because it seemed not to be delivering on the racial progress and uplift he believed educational segregation promised. A decade after its founding, the Smith school was proving itself less an aid to evolution than an impediment. Mann and his Examining Committee colleagues regarded that school as the embodiment of all of Boston’s most extreme instructional inadequacies. In Smith, they saw their most feverish nightmares of underperformance and underdevelopment realized. A fair education was one that would provide for separation, maturation, and colonization—in roughly that order. Writing assessment was to provide a rhetorical means for publicizing Smith’s

failures and promoting what Mann and Howe considered its students' right to mental culture: a colonization of the mind that would prepare students to colonize their bodies elsewhere.

### A “Chattering” Student Body: Re-examining the Smith School

To be sure, it seems unlikely that Mann would have, *ceteris paribus*, expected the Smith students to have performed as well as their white peers. Surprised to learn his audience at the Ohio Convention of Colored Freemen was not thrilled to hear of their intellectual inferiority, a wounded Mann lashed out at the unfair suggestion of intellectual parity between the races. In an October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1852 letter to the abolitionist and transcendentalist reformer Theodore Parker, he complained that “I have allowed the colored race superiority of the affections and sentiments—the upper end of man’s nature; but they want the intellect too” (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 385). Such an admission was one Mann could not bring himself to make. However, even against an expectation of black intellectual underdevelopment, Mann and Howe seem to have been shocked by the daguerreotype likenesses taken of the Smith students’ minds. In this section, I recover the rhetorical context for this shock. First, I resituate Mann and Howe’s uptake of the 1845 Smith writing assessment data within the ecology of assumptions about race, language, mental ability, and race-writing that guided the reformers’ inward eyes. Second, building on the previous chapter’s discussion of the phrenological rhetoric of display found in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” I show how the tabular display reconfigures the Smith student body as a visible site for developmental deformity, marred by mental aberrations and absences—a racial body scored all over with errors.

The judgment Mann reproduces in the *Common School Journal* singles out the Smith School as being “not only in an unsatisfactory, but in a deplorable condition”—its students, the

very nightmare image of mind-hollowing automatism Mann railed against throughout his career: “Their *chattering* about grammar shows only the power of their memories to retain the names of things which they do not understand; and their knowledge of geography is nothing but the faculty of repeating imperfectly names of states, towns, rivers, etc.” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 299, emphasis mine). Crucially, the examiners’ pursuit of fairness did not undermine their beliefs about phrenological race science; it was *underwritten* by them. Believing the New Race of African Americans deserved a better developmental destiny, Mann and Howe made use of the 1845 writing assessments to expose what they believed to be the mental rot spreading within the Smith School, characterizing the Smith student body in ways that suggest its racial inferiority and degeneration.

Consider, for instance, the language deployed to describe the Smith students’ writings. The word “chattering”—popularly associated today with frivolous or empty *speech*—might seem to us a puzzling choice to describe student expression in *writing*. Its inclusion in the Smith School sub-report is revealing, considering the significance of “chatter” in the conceptual vocabularies of both Mann and Howe. Like “parrotting” (see Chapter 3), “chatter” was deployed by these educators as a dehumanizing diagnostic term of art, labelling speech they considered mentally underdeveloped or degenerate. Bearing in mind the technical, medical meanings “chatter” held for Mann and Howe—both, elites within the rarefied circle of Massachusetts mental health professionals<sup>56</sup>—its application casts the writings of Smith’s students in the image of developmentally deficient speech. This identification, in turn, underlines the imagined significance and stakes of the errors marking Smith’s student body: The Smith scholars are not merely underperforming; their level of performance can be described in terms that connote

animality or idiocy, calling into question the proximity of the Smith student body to the mentally subhuman.

Elsewhere in Mann's writings, "chattering" takes on a particularly animalistic character. He describes unintelligent reading and speech as bearing "no more significancy than the *chattering* of magpies or the cawing of ravens" ("On District School Libraries" 306, emphasis mine), and frets that intellectual decline might leave posterity "to *chatter* and mow, to borrow in a hold, and crack nuts with the teeth" ("Editor's Introduction to Vol. IV" 5, emphasis mine). Mann feared that, without proper investment in mental culture, we would plunge headlong into a dystopian future where we are robbed of communicative ability and left only with a capacity for chatter. Such was the inevitable terminal point of our backward racial march in evolutionary time, with humanity descending what Suzanne Bordelon elsewhere calls "the civilizational ladder" (51). Mann provides us a glimpse of the rungs he believes make up this ladder when he warns,

He who would degrade the intellectual standing of Massachusetts to the level of Ireland, would degrade Ireland to the level of interior Africa, or of the Batta Islands. Nor could even the rank of savage life claim any immunity from still lower debasement. . . . There would be no halting post until the race had reached the limits of degradation in troglodytes and monkeys, and the godlike faculty of reason had been lost in the mechanism of animal instinct. ("Editor's Introduction to Vol. IV" 4-5)

The downward steps of the civilizational ladder imagined by Mann are these: Massachusetts to Ireland, Ireland to Africa (or, Mann offers, the Batta Islands); from "savage life" in Africa downward, our next racial rung is that of the troglodyte and monkey—the orang-outan, lost to the reason enjoyed by Massachusettsan minds, those Apollos in the waiting. It is only at *this* final dread state of degeneracy that communication devolves to mere chatter.

For Howe, then one of Massachusetts's leading experts on communicative disability, "chatter" was something like a medical term of art. It named speech that, while voluminous,

signaled mental inferiority and, perhaps, a congenital incapacity for understanding. Howe made this linkage explicit in his 1848 *Report Made to the Legislature of Massachusetts upon Idiocy*, telling the assembled representatives that language use is, “[a]s a general rule, . . . the surest test of the degree of intelligence” (97). “It is not the amount of *talking*,” he added, “but the number and variety of words at their command, that must be considered. Some who are garrulous to the last degree, chattering all the time, and repeating over and over all day long the few words and phrases they know, are, nevertheless, marked very low in this column”—the column, that is, for intelligence (*Report 97*, emphasis in original). Elsewhere in Howe’s medical writings, he adds a further caveat to the use of language testing as a mode of mental measurement. In *Training and Teaching Idiots*, a formal report delivered to the Massachusetts State Legislature, Howe advises his audience “not to confound *garrulity* with copiousness of language” when “testing the degree of intellect by the knowledge of language” (36, emphasis in original). To his dismay, Howe had discovered through his work with the Grammar School Committee that superficial use and regurgitation of words can be accomplished without true comprehension of what those words designate. Understanding of language—not mere language use—is the true criterion for testing the degree of intellect; speech that fails to meet standard is mere chatter, empty speech endemic to idiocy.

To equate the written performance of Smith’s students on the Grammar subject test to “chatter,” then, is to link their expressive abilities with the kinds of semantically empty speech Howe and Mann believed endemic to the mentally underdeveloped. The phrenological inward eye sees *chatter* as testifying to developmental backwardness—a dysgenic state of mind below even the polished imbecility Mann usually busied himself trying to eradicate. This critique of the intellectual emptiness of the Smith students’ writings is double-voiced in “Boston Grammar and

Writing Schools,” articulated first in the body of the examination boards’ reports, and second in the tabular displays Mann publishes as an accompaniment to them—displays exposing to view the body of errors believed to disfigure these chattering scholars’ minds. As discussed in the preceding chapter, these tabular displays—which provide a column-by-column, school-by-school comparison of Boston’s student bodies—were intended by Mann to pierce the public eye with the image of mental degeneration.

Troublingly, the Smith students’ performance on the Grammar subject test was, at three percent correct, their second *highest* subject test score (see fig. 3 in Chapter 2)—after the Geography subject test at 11 percent correct. The Grammar School Committee reserved some of its most caustic criticism for this high-water mark for Smith, charging that the highest level of performance the Smith student body appears capable of is mere parrotry: “repeating ... names,” but only *imperfectly* so. The sad story of this flawed performance can be found in the Grammar School Examining Committee’s tabular display of Smith’s “Geography” subject test results (see fig. 6 below). On this sub-test, Smith’s students only answered a total of 27 questions correctly (out of a possible 248, had all questions been correctly answered by all students); a number that pales in comparison to the 38 incorrect answers the Smith scholars provided, and the 183 questions they left unanswered. What’s worse, in the process of submitting answers, Smith’s students generated a startling number of additional errors in writing: 19 in spelling, 219 in punctuation, and five in grammar for that small body of 65 total answers the Smith student body even attempted.

Several factors conspire to place this performance in an even more unfavorable light. For one, Smith was almost unique among Boston’s common schools in having only one school master, rather than two. As a general rule, Boston’s white-serving common schools were divided



into Grammar and Writing departments, each with its own sovereign school master, responsible for instruction in some subjects, and not others. The Grammar master, for instance, led instruction in grammar and composition; the Writing master was accountable for students' handwriting and for mathematics instruction. Mann and his Examining Committee colleagues shared the opinion that this dual sovereignty was a source of student underperformance: a major "defect in our schools, which operates upon them injuriously, is that which gives to each school two heads" (qtd. in H. Mann, "Boston" 311).

NAME OF SCHOOL.	Total No. of scholars in the school.	No. examined.	Proportion of the school examined.	Average age of those examined.		No. of correct answers given to the whole No. of questions, by the whole No. of scholars examined.	No. of correct answers there would have been, had all the scholars answered correctly.	No. of incorrect answers given.	No. of errors committed in Spelling, in giving the answers.	No. of errors committed in Punctuation.	No. of errors committed in Grammar.	No. of questions not answered.	Per centage of correct answers.	Relative rank of the school.
				Yrs.	Ms.									
ADAMS,	418	36	.09	12	11	421	1116	447	179	1451	5	248	.38	.0342
BOYLSTON,	534	33	.06	14		397	1023	317	98	1398	0	309	.39	.0234
BOWDOIN,	508	42	.08	14	8	563	1302	493	172	987	1	246	.43	.0344
BRIMMER,	513	40	.08	13		379	1240	463	231	1189	20	398	.31	.0248
ELIOT,	456	22	.05	12	8	292	682	187	57	829	6	203	.43	.0215
ENDICOTT,	478	28	.06	13		252	868	318	160	1088	3	298	.29	.0174
FRANKLIN,	418	20	.05	14	6	192	620	216	50	498	2	212	.31	.0155
HAWES,	408	17	.04	13	9	174	527	199	35	261	3	154	.33	.0132
HANCOCK,	509	45	.09	13	9	515	1395	325	94	617	1	555	.37	.0333
JOHNSON,	547	49	.09	13	6½	430	1519	457	126	1012	2	632	.28	.0252
MATHER,	485	17	.04	14	6	208	527	195	83	774	4	124	.39	.0156
MAYHEW,	368	24	.07	13	6	180	744	156	133	609	3	414	.24	.0168
OTIS,	467	27	.06	13	2	154	837	117	46	309	2	566	.18	.0108
PHILLIPS,	440	22	.05	12	8	225	682	222	104	371	5	235	.33	.0165
SMITH,	163	8	.05			27	248	38	19	219	5	183	.11	.0055
WELLS,	307	29	.09	13	3	384	899	254	72	805	1	261	.43	.0387
WINTHROP,	507	28	.06	14	6½	400	868	273	100	1608	0	195	.46	.0276
DUDLEY, } ROXBURY.	350	29	.08	14	6	493	899	324	51	1111	0	82	.55	.0440

Fig. 6. Results from the 1845 Grammar School "Geography" examination (H. Mann, "Boston" 329).

Unifying the Grammar and Writing Schools under the leadership of one school master was one of the key reforms advocated by Mann and the committees, a move they anticipated

would significantly increase student learning and, thereby, improve test performance. Yet if Mann and his colleagues looked to the deformity of dual administration—two heads, for one school body—as a partial explanation for the flawed race-writing taking place in Boston’s common schools, they would have to search for explanations elsewhere when interpreting Smith’s writing assessment data. Smith’s students *already* benefitted from a single, unified school head, which, if not giving them a structural advantage over the other schools, at least robbed them of one excuse for their dismal performance.

NAME OF SCHOOL.	Total No. of scholars in the school.	No. examined.	Proportion of the school examined.	Average age of those examined.		No. of correct answers given to the whole No. of questions, by the whole No. of scholars examined.	No. of correct answers there would have been, had all the scholars answered correctly.	No. of incorrect answers given.	No. of errors committed in Spelling, in giving the answers.	No. of errors committed in Punctuation.	No. of errors committed in Grammar.	No. of questions not answered.	Per centage of correct answers.	Relative rank of the school.
				Yrs.	Ms.									
ADAMS,	418	35	.08	12	11	333	980	317	26	577	12	330	.34	.0272
BOYLSTON,	534	36	.07	14		402	1008	426	20	585	9	180	.40	.0280
BOWDOIN,	508	43	.08	14	8	556	1204	365	3	591	8	283	.46	.0368
BRIMMER,	513	56	.11	13		235	1568	310	18	369	1	1023	.15	.0165
ELIOT,	456	21	.05	12	8	322	588	127	9	363	4	139	.55	.0275
ENDICOTT,	478	34	.07	13		93	952	42	4	92	1	817	.10	.0070
FRANKLIN,	418	19	.05	14	6	117	532	175	8	109	0	240	.22	.0110
HAWES,	408	17	.04	13	9	96	476	160	10	110	1	220	.20	.0080
HANCOCK,	509	45	.09	13	9	179	1266	84	6	110	2	997	.14	.0126
JOHNSON,	547	50	.09	13	6½	197	1400	210	1	245	0	993	.14	.0126
MATHER,	485	18	.04	14	6	134	504	110	0	185	0	260	.27	.0108
MAYHEW,	368	20	.05	13	6	95	560	95	3	136	1	370	.17	.0085
OTIS,	467	24	.05	13	2	76	672	33	3	69	3	563	.11	.0055
PHILLIPS,	440	35	.08	12	8	78	980	99	10	294	1	803	.08	.0064
SMITH,	163	6	.04			0	168	16	1	16	0	152	.00	.0000
WELLS,	307	29	.09	13	3	309	812	234	4	486	2	269	.38	.0342
WINTHROP,	507	28	.06	14	6½	289	784	222	16	482	4	273	.37	.0222
DUDLEY, } ROXBURY.	350	29	.08	14	6	367	812	133	5	384	1	312	.45	.0360

Fig. 7. Results from the 1845 Grammar School “Definitions” examination (H. Mann, “Boston” 328).

The Smith students’ performance was more damning still when we recall the committee’s aside that the Geography subject test questions (the only questions on which Smith’s students display any degree of success) required only brief factual answers, like the “names of states,

towns, rivers, etc.” These questions did not prompt the kind of involved written responses that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Mann believed necessary for developmentally meaningful race-writing. Yet somehow, even on answers of remarkable brevity, “some merely an affirmation or a negation, in one word” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292), Smith’s student body still managed to score itself all over with errors in writing. With perhaps their only Smith-related sigh of relief, the Examining Committees might have concluded that this large number of unanswered questions indicated, at least, that Smith’s students were largely guileless, and therefore less likely to be as morally bankrupt as they were intellectually vacuous. This, because Smith’s students demonstrated themselves unwilling (or intellectually incapable) of attempting incorrect answers, following instead the honorable course of action for the intellectually inferior: Leaving test items blank.

Gut-wrenching though it may be, the Geography subject test represents Smith student performance at its *best*. The daguerreotype likenesses provided by the “Definitions” subject test displays the Smith student body at its worst. The tabular display for this test (see fig. 7, above) discloses that Smith’s students provided *no* correct definitions. As a group, they unsuccessfully attempted 16 answers, and left 152 blank. Look to the two right-most columns, and you’ll see Smith’s percent of correct answers is *zero*, as is their relative rank among Boston’s common schools—the display, showing their minds to be nothing but error and empty space. *Chatter*, without even the superficial correctness that might be expected from a parrot or well-tuned automaton. The tabular display for the Definitions subject test in “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” tells this story about Smith, while the main text of the article tells another, dismissing Smith from consideration altogether. Summarizing school results on the Definitions subject test, the Grammar School Committee writes in their narrative report that, “The Eliot School, (the

highest,) gives 55 per cent. of correct answers; the Phillips School, (the lowest,) gives 8 per cent.” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 296). The Smith student body is nowhere to be seen. Howe and his co-authors, perhaps taking the inferiority of Smith on the Definitions sub-test as a foregone conclusion, opted to write off the Smith School in a more literal sense. The “chattering” Smith students, so reviled for their perceived inattention to (or incapacity for understanding) the meanings of words, have been erased from the write-up for this subject test—their failure, apparently beyond *definition*.

### **Interesting the Smith Scholars in “the Condition of the Colored Race”**

The Grammar School Committee makes clear that the Smith student body’s imperfect, mechanical engagement with words is not the only sign of its mental deficiency. Indeed, the intellectual failure of the Smith scholars was gauged against another, peculiarly racialized standard: “There are certain parts of physical and political geography which we supposed might be made most interesting to colored children, those relating to the West India Islands, the condition of the colored race in Cuba, Jamaica, Hayti &c.; the colonies in Africa, the condition of the natives, &c; but the scholars of the Smith school seemed to know nothing about them” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 300). Curiously, the printed Geography subject test included not a single question about the state of black bodies in the Caribbean or in Africa. Indeed, *none* of the subject tests published by the Examining Committees included questions pertaining to these areas in terms of “physical geography” or “political geography”—the latter of which was a topic of study that subsumed not only politics and government, but what we now would call ethnology and anthropology. These racially-inflected questions appear to have been administered to the Smith student body alone—an informal diagnostic follow-up to the formal written examination,

intended to probe the depths of Smith student ignorance.<sup>57</sup> Further interrogation, it seems, was needed to number the errors disfiguring the Smith student body, and fully fathom the emptiness of the Smith student mind.

Attending to the underlying logic of this additional round of questioning reveals much about the reformers' racialized expectations for writing assessment at Smith. These beliefs about black racial interest frame and fuel the Grammar School Committee's interpretation of the Smith scholars' writing performance. Apparently, in the name of fairness, the Smith student body was held to a complex racial double-standard: expected to fall behind the standard set by their white counterparts in performance and progress, while *at the same time* made responsible for additional bodies of knowledge believed by the examiners to be racially-specific to African American development. In what we might read as a perversion of culturally-responsive education,<sup>58</sup> the Smith student body is held doubly accountable for its lack of knowledge where "the condition of the colored race" was concerned—this, being the topic Howe and his coauthors expected would be most interesting to the Smith scholars.

Underwriting the examiners' decision to adapt or add examination questions for the Smith assessments is a particular racializing assumption: These knowledges are racially interesting because Smith's students are, in a genealogical sense, racially *interested* in them—the new African American race, naturally and historically invested in the "condition of the colored race," and therefore responsible for knowing it. Though the examiners thought it fair for the Smith scholars and their white counterparts to be tested on the condition of the white race in the United States and in Europe, Howe and his coauthors give no indication that antebellum Boston's white students were asked anything about "Cuba, Jamaica, Hayti &c."

Suggestively, the spaces identified by Howe and his colleagues as supposedly interesting to the Smith scholars—the West Indies and African colonies—align with those areas Mann thought appropriate for black colonization, having “proposed the establishment of a new African state in the West Indies or on the Atlantic coast of Africa” (Tomlinson 288). Only certain spaces were environmentally calibrated to the black race’s developmental needs, Mann thought. “I believe there is a band of territory around the earth on each side of the equator, which belongs to the African race,” he wrote, explaining that “[t]heir creator adapted their organizations to its climate. The commotions of the earth have jostled many of them out of their place; but they will be restored to it when reason and justice shall succeed to the terrible guilt and passions that displaced them” (“Letter of Horace” 68). The thought that Smith’s scholars would be interested in the physical and political geography of the West Indies and the colonial territories within Africa might have doubled, for Mann and Howe, as an expression of wishful colonialist thinking. Black students knowledgeable about these spaces—spaces naturally suited to their development—might have taken the first steps in their readiness for their own colonization at a later date.

Tabling, for the moment, this question of colonization, it is important we remember that, within Mann’s phrenological circle, *interest* was believed to have important race-writing implications. As we have seen, Mann followed his intellectual patron, the phrenologist George Combe, in prescribing a course of instruction that proceeded from those objects most personal and familiar outward. Only a handful of pages after commenting on the Smith student body’s errors, the Grammar Committee reminded readers of students’ abundant “natural love of mental exercise,” which needed only engagement with the right kind of “objects ... to *interest* the different mental faculties” (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 321, emphasis mine). By engaging

students' natural interests, a teacher can achieve success "without whip or spur," with the lesson itself serving to "enchain" students and secure their mental culture. Course content related to the West Indies and the colonies of Africa was expected, by Howe and the other Grammar School examiners, to provide students with precisely this kind of interesting informatic object. Howe and his Examining Committee co-authors do not conjecture whether the failure to "enchain" Smith's student body stems from the school master's instructional failure to present students with these particular knowledges—or, instead, whether the Smith student body's mental faculties were so extensively deranged and degraded that even knowledges believed to be racially close to home could not sustain their interest and engagement.

Whatever the immediate cause, the outcome is the same: The extent of Smith's intellectual deficits can be measured in their putative lack of racial self-knowledge. In this way, culturally responsive examination is weaponized against students, used to sound the depths of their ignorance, signaling more extensive deficiency than could otherwise be made visible. If students were to have mastered anything, the implication goes, it would have been culturally-appropriate knowledges—knowledges curated and examined by those William H. Watkins has, in another context, referred to as "the white architects of black education." A peculiarly colonialist racial logic appears to be at work here. Within antebellum Boston, under the cover of nominal equality, the free black population lives in a state of segregation and subalternity, their children siloed into the Smith School and disallowed from attending other schools reserved for white students—including those schools closest to where they lived. It is a grotesque irony, then, that the intellectual attainments of the Smith scholars, themselves subjected to a form of internal colonization and apartheid in segregated antebellum Boston, are assessed ultimately on the basis of their knowledges of the "colored race" in colonial space. The mental development of the

Smith student body, it seems, is predicated on its ability to adopt and maintain the colonial gaze over black bodies on the page, consuming and controlling them as objects of knowledge. In at least this circumstance, race-writing is supposed to derive from writing about race. Written examination peers into the Smith scholars' minds, portraitizing their proximity to this colonialist ideal of racial (self-)mastery.

It is no wonder, then, that the Smith student body's failures in physical and political geography sting Howe and his colleagues. This failure is also, pointedly, a failure to engage in the colonial "geography of reasoning" (Tlostanova and Mignolo 10), taken to be an important sign of civilization and mental culture. That is to say, when registering their dismay at the Smith scholars' seeming ignorance of those parts of political and physical geography imagined "most interesting to colored children," the Grammar School Examining Committee is registering also their distress that this exceptional student body was failing to participate in the geography of reasoning proper to progressive Western subjects; a reasoning too, that might be expected of those ready for colonization elsewhere, relocating themselves—as Mann and Howe hoped—in territories outside of the American political body. Successful participation in this rationality would demonstrate the Smith students' cultural proximity to a white racial ideal, and by extension, their developmental distance from despised black bodies abroad. To demonstrate their mental culture, the performance required of Smith's students (and these students alone) is to exhibit curricular mastery over the black bodies that peopled present and former colonies—whether Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, or the colonies carved into the African continent. Pressure is placed on the new African American race at Smith to perform their progress—their racial development marked, in part, by an ability to re-render "colored" and "native" bodies as bodies of writing, capturing and *charater-izing* them on the page.<sup>59</sup>



In his editorial introduction to Volume VIII of *Common School Journal*, penned for publication closely on the heels of his “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article, Mann gives a more explicit sense for why this particular kind of gap in the Smith students’ cultural knowledge might have seemed especially startling for those who shared Mann’s phrenological worldview. To the inward eye, knowledge of political and physical geography is read as an important sign of inner mental development, distinguishing the “civilized” from the “savage” (H. Mann, “Editor’s Introduction to Volume VIII” 155). Mann opens his Volume VIII introduction with a physiognomic comparison of savage and civilized bodies, reminding readers that differences in education are intimately related to racial differences in bodily development (144-50). To see *racial* differences in the body is, in effect, to read differences in education— instruction written into, and legible in, the physical frame. Due to superiority in mental development over the course of generations, the “educated man” is stronger, healthier, and better adapted to the natural world than is his savage counterpart, Mann insists.

Mann devotes nearly all of this text’s remainder to contrasting what he identifies as “circles of things” *beyond* the body, in which civilizational development can be discerned (“Editor’s Introduction to Volume VIII” 150). These “circles” are sites that index one’s position in the scale of humanity—practices, products, and powers that disclose inner development. Surfaces, in other words, on which inward readings of the mind can be performed. Notable within these circles are the very knowledges the Smith student body is derided for not possessing. With a sharp tongue, Mann asks,

In geography, what does the savage know of the form of the earth on which he dwells; of the different races that inhabit it; or even of the nations that dwell at any distance from his own? In history, ... what knowledge has he of that vast procession of nations which has passed over the earth,—the Assyrian, the Egyptian, the Grecian, the Roman; of the mighty dynasties of more modern times, or even of his own lineage and ancestry, at any remote date? (155)

Knowledge of geography and racial history registers the difference between savagery and civilization—a difference in culture that, within Mann’s phrenological worldview, had important evolutionary implications. Inter-racial differences and disparities, after all, result from differences in mental governance across generational time. Our developmental distance from savagery can be inwardly read in our conceptual mastery *over* time (historical knowledge) and space (geographical knowledge)—the extent of our intellectual culture, legible in our intellectual reach. In apparent reference to the white Western world, Mann glories in the idea that “by the more educated nations, the earth has been circumnavigated, and all its parts laid down in a book, as exactly as a surveyor plots a field he has surveyed; and the race, with its myriad millions, traced back to its unborn parentage” (155). By Mann’s lights, it seems that the sun never sets on the empire of white racial understanding.

A fair education was one that inducted students into this imperial mental order. Writing assessment in service of educational fairness was to map the geography of student reason, revealing how fully that territory had been colonized. Judged against this standard, the Smith scholars were apparently not being ratcheted up the ladder of civilization. For the white architects of black education in antebellum Boston, the fact that “the scholars of the Smith school seemed to know nothing” about “the condition of the colored race” abroad demonstrated an alarming, multidimensional sign that “separate but equal” common schooling was failing to foster racial uplift. In their written examination failure, Smith’s students are caught in a racial double-bind, neither coming close to the (already low) performance of Boston’s white students, nor commanding the colonial geography of reason that would evidence their readiness to colonize elsewhere. Interpreted within Mann’s phrenological framework for understanding racial development, and his related sympathy for segregated schooling, Smith’s students would have

appeared too innately disadvantaged to compete with white Americans, while at the same time, perhaps not developed enough for colonizing and living on their own elsewhere. With integration not treated as a viable option, reform of the segregated school provided perhaps the only path forward—the half-measure to be met prior to colonization.

In an important sense, though, the failure of the Smith scholars was only a special case of a more general problem Mann intended to root out in American education. “The present condition of the race is as much below attainable perfection as it is above possible abasement,” Mann believed (“Editorial Introduction ... Volume VIII” 163). However racially suspect Smith’s students seemed, it was believed that—but for the grace of the common school—white students could also descend to the level of savage underdevelopment evident in the non-white world, though presumably Mann and his colleagues would have imagined this descent a steeper step for white students than their black counterparts. Closing his Volume VIII introduction, Mann sets before us the evolutionary stakes of formal education, which he believed conveyed the human race toward degeneracy or divinity, re-forming it in the image of orang-outangs or Apollos:

In mid-space we stand. Ascent and descent are equally open to us. We may fall until we become brethren and companions to the *savage* and the *troglydyte*; we may rise until our spiritual nature shall claim affinity with angels. All those who are worthily laboring to promote the cause of education are laboring to elevate mankind into the upper and purer regions of civilization, Christianity, and the worship of the true God; all those who are obstructing the progress of this cause are *impelling the race backwards* into barbarism and idolatry. (163, emphasis mine)

The race-writing work of the common school was the work of practical Christianity, disciplining body, mind, and soul in accordance with the divine laws embodied in nature. Within this framework for fairness and progress, the Smith scholars are at once exceptional and emblematic of the need for common school reform—precariously placed, as they are, on the precipice of this backward fall into barbarism—their writings already mere “chatter.”

### **“...Saving Always the Smith School...”**

Having outlined the sad state of Smith’s intellectual development, the “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” sub-report dedicated to Smith’s students concludes with a note on their shocking lack of moral development, and a forecast of the progress these students can reasonably be expected to reap, should proper reforms be planted. It is bad enough, the Grammar School Committee tells us, that the Smith student body is at a low state of mental culture—so exceptionally low that Howe and his co-authors reserve most of their acknowledgments of Smith for dismissive parenthetical asides (“saving always the Smith school”). This Committee, though, not only analyzed and interpreted written examination data, but also monitored the behavioral conduct of Smith’s students during the assessment process. Howe and his co-authors again found themselves scandalized. In their report, they reserved a special degree of shock for the moral chaos they witnessed at the Smith School, perhaps because phrenological thinkers like Mann believed that the black race’s *moral* faculties were, on average, more developed than those of the white race. “The blacks, as a race, I believe to be less aggressive and predatory than the whites, more forgiving, and, *generally*, not capable of the white man’s tenacity and terribleness of revenge,” Mann wrote (“Letter of Horace” 68, emphasis in original). Even here, in what was believed to be their domain of greatest natural aptitude, Smith’s students were assessed as developmental disappointments.

More distressing to the Examining Committee even than “the intellectual deficiency which prevails in this school” was the moral disorder they found in Smith School, legible—they tell us—in the unruly bodies of students refusing to heed their school master’s call: “there is a want of discipline; an indifference to verbal requests for order, which indicates the frequency of appeal to more stirring motives; a want of respectful attention, and many indefinable but clear

indications of a low moral tone” (qtd in. H. Mann, “Boston” 300). In spite of their abolitionist leanings, the white sub-report authors seem unaware (or untroubled) by the irony that, at a time of chattel slavery, their primary complaint about this free black student population is that they are not more docile, and that they fail regularly to comply with the demands of the white master of the school. Though the Grammar School Committee does not elaborate on this point, the apparent infrequency of appeals to more *stirring* motives might be read as a charge that the school master, Abner Forbes, is dangerously over-reliant on the debasing use of fear to motivate students. As discussed earlier in this chapter, such a charge had already been publicly levelled at Forbes, accusing him of improper, even cruel and unusual indulgence in corporal punishment—and of having an abiding belief in the innate mental incapacity of black students.

Yet while decrying the soft bigotry of Forbes’s low expectations (and perhaps the *hard* bigotry of his ferule), the Grammar School Committee is cautious when sketching what they themselves consider a fair level of performance to expect from the Smith students’ writings. Racial development will take time, they claim, and there is more than Abner Forbes standing in its way:

Your Committee are aware, that there are many circumstances to be considered before blame should be laid on any individual, for the present low state of the school; they are aware of the difficulties in obtaining a good average attendance, and they will not say that another individual could at once inspire the colored population with more interest in the school, could secure a more punctual attendance, or could *awaken the faculties* and interest the attention of the scholars. (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 300, emphasis mine)

There is only so much, the Committee urges readers to believe, that any school master can accomplish. They felt it only reasonable to expect that the faculties of Smith’s students would remain slumbering for the immediate future. This itself is an astonishing admission. In that same report, Howe and his co-authors state categorically of students that, “The natural love for mental

exercise is so great, the variety of objects which may be held up to interest the different mental faculties is so inexhaustible, and it is so easy to kindle the enthusiasm of a class and make it extend even to the dull, that, as we believe, the ferule or the spur of emulation is seldom or never *necessary* to quicken it” (321, emphasis in original).

For the primary (read: white) imagined beneficiaries of common school reform, intellectual development proceeds apace, their faculties naturally awakened and inclined toward progress. Yet the Grammar School Committee finds itself unwilling to say whether the same developmental rule applies to the Smith student body. Here as elsewhere, Smith is set aside (“saving always the Smith school”) and held to a separate and radically unequal standard. Presumably exempted from claims about the natural love for mental exercise, Smith’s students are relegated to an intellectual caste below “even the dull” contingent of Boston’s white population.

In regarding themselves—rather than Smith’s students and their families—the arbiters of what fairness meant for Boston’s black population, the 1845 examiners provide a painful demonstration of the perils that can accompany even the most high-minded pursuit of progress through writing assessment. The Grammar School Committee admonish readers to reject Forbes’s low expectations, only to install in their place a *differently* low, race-adjusted expectation. They “believe that there is good sense enough among the parents, and intellect enough among the children, if fairly enlisted in the subject, and directed by a zealous and discreet friend [i.e., school master]”—that is to say, someone other than Abner Forbes—“to create a school which shall reach at least to the rank *now attained* by one half of the city schools” (emphasis in original). Such a middling level of improvement would undoubtedly, in the committee’s view, still fall radically short of those attainments to be desired from white students,

considering the rank “now attained” by Boston’s white common schools was, in the Grammar School Committee’s judgment, nightmarishly low. Indeed, they make clear that even the *highest* rank attained by the schools examined is so in need of progress that,

The first feeling occasioned by looking over these [examination] returns is that of entire incredulity. It is very difficult to believe that, in the Boston Schools, there should be so many children in the *first classes*, unable to answer such questions; that there should be so many who try to answer, and answer imperfectly; that there should be so many absurd answers; so many errors in spelling, in grammar, and in punctuation. If by any accident these documents should be destroyed, we could hardly hope that your faith in our accuracy would induce you to believe the truth if we told it. But the papers are all before you, each signed by the scholar who wrote it. (qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston” 292, emphasis in original)

With great effort, we seem to be told, the Smith student body can be raised up to a level of performance that would be so shockingly dismal for white students that it must be seen to be believed. At Smith, Howe and his co-authors assure us, there is “intellect enough among the children” for that.<sup>60</sup>

We might begin to trace, in the examination of the Smith School, the contours of a familiar colonial story: Governments (and their schools) take it as their paternalistic burden to supervise and uplift putatively lesser peoples, securing for them an evolutionary development they would be incapable of on their own. In this sense, as Geraldine Heng notes, “[t]he logic of evolutionary progress by which colonizers justify their extraterritoriality and craft their right to colonial rule ... is pronouncedly a *racial logic*” (38). The imperative that colonized peoples improve is, however, one that no degree of progress seems to satisfy. “Racial logic of the evolutionary kind seems to promise (or even mandate) progress,” Heng tells us, “yet racial logic’s ostensible goal of a subject population’s achievement of a civilizational maturity which will guarantee their equality with their colonial masters is never attained, but merely floats as a vaunted possibility on an ever-receding horizon” (38-39). For students of color, caught in

colonial systems and logics, the promised future of developmental equality with their putative betters is often a tomorrow that never comes. Fairness becomes a trap, when its terms are set by those who imagine you as inferior and arrogate to themselves the responsibility of managing your improvement.

Mann writes in detail about this ever-receding horizon, saddened by what he takes to be the natural subordination of even free black bodies to white ones, a condition he considered probably permanent—absent (at least) a long period of segregation or black colonization to a *new* New World. Mourning his own self-declared, natural racial supremacy, Mann argued that voluntary racial segregation through the “formation of communities by themselves,” regarding these as being “indispensable to the elevation of the colored people,” because it freed them from the insuperable challenge of competing against white Americans for opportunity and advancement (“Letter of Horace” 68). Mann, after all, took as scientific fact the idea that the white race was mentally superior to their black counterparts. Segregation—like voluntary colonization elsewhere—was believed by Mann a necessary instrument of fairness, because for black Americans “even what progress they do make, must be, with some extraordinary exceptions, *in the rear* of those among whom they live, and without any chance to pass by or overtake them, in the march of improvement” (emphasis in original). Mann advised black Americans, like those attending Smith, to make peace with the putative facts of their sad social condition, resigning themselves to a state of comparative inferiority—at least, until significant developmental gains had been made: “We may condemn the iniquity of this degradation, as vehemently as we please; but iniquity is a fact which a wise man takes into account as much as any other fact, and in laying his plans for future action, he recognisis [sic] until he can remove it” (emphasis in original). Assessing and accepting this situation, Mann claimed, was one



precondition “for the colored population...ever to rise, as a body, above a very low level of development.” Segregated schooling was another.

There should be little doubt that Mann, America’s leading champion of the common school, expected education to play a leading role in this *longue durée* of segregationist race-writing. Nevertheless, he was not violently opposed to integrated educational spaces, if black students could pass written examinations demonstrating their fitness for institutional belonging. We will see in the next chapter what educational allowances Mann advised for non-white students he believed to represent “extraordinary exceptions”—those whose integration into Antioch College during the 1850s he actively and passionately defended. For now, let us consider the importance of the tale Mann tells about the “degradation” that nature requires of the new African American race. This imagined fact of human inequality, with its depiction of some races near-permanently lagging behind others in an eternal civilizational march, is more than an unwelcome artifact of the race science prevalent in Mann’s day: It provides the constitutive background for common school reform in segregated antebellum Boston. It animates the secular gospel of phrenology, which explained for Mann and his reformer circle how racial differences emerged, what they represented, and how—through education—these often-undesirable differences might provisionally be overcome. And it underwrites the conclusions about the Smith student body’s developmental progress publicized by the examination committees’ reports and recirculated in the “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article.

The segregation of Boston’s common schools has great promise for the Smith scholars, we are told, so long as proper reforms are put in place. Fire the schoolmaster and rely on higher motive-powers, and—Howe and his colleagues chime with backhanded optimism—Smith’s students might, with great effort, rise to the level of performance “now achieved” by their

underperforming white peers. In the same breath, the 1845 examiners promise developmental improvement to Smith's students while condemning them to a place in the rear of white students in the march of improvement.

When we allow ourselves to zoom out from the 1845 examination reports themselves, as historians have tended to do, it becomes all too easy to think of Mann and his colleagues as heroically publicizing, in their exposé of Smith, the injustices and failings of segregated schooling writ large. And in the absence of close textual attention to the ways the 1845 examiners characterized the Smith student body, it becomes all too easy to overlook the racist ecology of assumptions that give "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" form and force.

Zooming in, we see things differently. The daguerreotype likenesses circulated by Mann and his colleagues are intended to depict a Smith student body that is unconscionably underserved by its schoolmaster—but that would suffer from innate racial underdevelopment, even under better instructional conditions. And while Mann and Howe remained curiously silent on the question of school integration, close attention to their public stances on black racial development gives us reason to understand that, in calling attention to the "deplorable condition" of Smith, they wanted nothing more or less than a caste school that fulfilled its promise to develop what they believed to be an innately inferior subpopulation. Develop them, that is, at least until they reached the level of "dull" white students, or attained the level of enlightenment necessary to self-deport to a new colony of their own. However much the 1845 examinations may have provided a catalyst for social justice reform in education, it is important we acknowledge that in their advocacy for fairness, Mann and his examiner colleagues relied on existing racist logics and reinforced pernicious racist hierarchies. They imagined Boston's black student body as developmentally inferior and in desperate need of race-writing intervention; yet

common school reform, they also believed, could only re-form the black body so much. In the minds of Mann and his colleagues, the future attainments of the Smith scholars were prescribed in their pasts, in black and white—legible on the surfaces of their examination papers and the surfaces of their skins.

Within this racist logic, the failure of the Smith School scholars was exceptional. There is a sense, though, in which the Smith School serves as an appropriate emblem for Mann's reform agenda and the role of written examination within it. Simultaneously, the Smith School sits apart from the other schools examined—a racial and developmental exception—and symbolizes the student body Mann saw as everywhere in need of intervention and saving. Indeed, if the target of Mann's energies was student underdevelopment, and the root of his racial anxieties was the fear that this underdevelopment could lead to enduring racial difference and deficiency, then the Smith School provides him an exception that synecdochically embodies the rule.

With every report and speech he penned, Mann set himself to work at mapping deficiencies in students' mental culture and motivating new and greater levels of racial progress. Written examination, his daguerreotype likeness of the mind, provided the diagnostic basis for discerning, documenting, and publicizing these deficiencies—blazoning the errors of the student body so that they might shock the public into taking more seriously the developmental needs of that doubly new race of young Americans. Even more than the class of “dull” white students, the Smith student body is treated as a new race perpetually in need of progressive intervention. A new race in need of saving by expert educators—indeed, *exceptional* for that fact. With this developmental chasm in view, we might think back to the dismissive parenthetical aside offered by Howe and his co-authors as unintentionally freighted with a second meaning, providing a neat

(if inadvertent) figure for the project Mann found himself engaged in: *Saving always*—that is, “always saving”—*the Smith School*.

## CHAPTER 5

### Testing Humanity at Antioch College:

#### Entrance and Inclusion in Mann's Experimental Assessment Ecology

*Th[e] very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, allows an act of inclusion to maintain the form of exclusion. (Ahmed 43)*

The histories we typically write about writing assessment are punctuated by strange, if periodic, pauses—elliptical breaks where our storytelling sputters and leaps forward, transitioning sharply from one supposed assessment innovation to the next, as though nothing of consequence took place between or around them. Horace Mann's 1845 support for written examination is, in several of our most accessible historical accounts, trailed immediately—almost breathlessly—by the *next* advance imagined as important by writing studies scholars: often the entrance examinations in English composition adopted by Harvard College for its 1874 school year. Nearly 30 years of assessment, spanned in a blink (see, e.g., Huot, O'Neill, and Moore 496; Lynne 21-2; Yancey "Writing" 2). In this chapter, we return to this overlooked period, an interstice of writing assessment history invisibilized by our elliptical accounts. Here, we remain with Mann a while longer, accompanying him as he leaves Boston and makes his way to Yellow Springs, Ohio. There, he would in 1853 serve as the founding President of Antioch College—a position he held until his death in 1859. What we find at Antioch College is a complex and vibrant assessment ecology, with virtually all facets of college training coordinated by writing—and by systems put in place to examine it.

The phrenological innovation of written examination, piloted by Mann and his colleagues in Boston's public schools, had a more immediate college-level successor than Harvard's entrance examinations. Assessment at Antioch was, as we will see, animated by an understanding that *writing* exposed for public scrutiny the mind of the *writer*, and that this daguerreotype likeness could be used to identify and root out mental errors. Through writing and writing assessment, the race itself could be revised and rewritten. As we will find in this chapter, the broader project of promoting evolutionary progress at Antioch was inextricably linked to the college's assessment-rhetoric of *inclusion*.

To date, no account of assessment history has considered this interstitial period in depth—nor, as it happens, have these accounts tended to even acknowledge the existence of Midwestern schools prior to the 1889 arrival of Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan, with Scott emerging as an important critic of existing writing instruction priorities and exclusionary entrance examinations—like those, he charged, that could be found at Harvard (F. Scott; see Gere, “Empirical”). Instead, historians have elided the period and place occupied by Antioch by narrowing their critical attentions on better-known (often ivy-coated) Eastern school sites, or—in a move at least equally popular—have located the origins of assessment exclusively at Harvard, absenting from our historical consciousness all preceding instances of writing assessment, *including* the 1845 written examinations in Boston's public schools. For writing studies scholars, the historiographic jump-cut from Boston, Massachusetts in 1845 to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1874 has been partly a function of the gravitational narrative pull exerted on the discipline by Harvard and its mandatory Freshman A course—established in 1885, and widely remembered as America's first required course in Freshman composition. Harvard's nineteenth-century composition innovations—inaugurated during the 50-year tenure of its

reformer president, Charles William Eliot—have rendered it a primal scene that writing studies histories continually revisit. And, as Writing Studies scholars have been careful to underscore, Harvard’s mandatory freshman composition coursework emerged as a response to the perceived inadequacies of its students on the college’s English composition entrance examination (see, e.g., Crowley, *Composition*; Elliot, *On a Scale*; S. Miller, *Textual*). Through its introduction of entrance examination in English composition, Harvard is remembered as constructing for itself a deficient student body in need of the linguistic remediation by means of English composition coursework. As Sharon Crowley recalls, the examination “continually created appropriate subjects for the study of English—subjects who were visibly, graphically, unable to meet Harvard’s standards” (*Composition* 71).

By contrast, Antioch College’s first decade has been all-but entirely overlooked in existing writing studies scholarship (but see L. Buchanan; Welsch, *Nineteenth-Century* and “Thinking”), and has, to date, gone unreferenced and undiscussed in any account of writing assessment history. Even within the broader realm of education historiography, Antioch is, as often as not, treated as a kind of extended footnote in the celebrated life of Mann, an eccentric appendage to his more substantial efforts in Massachusetts. W. Boyd Alexander captures this sense when he writes, “The commonest impression has been that Antioch was a tragic anticlimax in Mann’s life” (5; see also Straker 9). And, as the historian and archivist Robert Straker has documented, several of Mann’s most prominent friends and contemporaries shared in this view, with Ralph Waldo Emerson bewailing Mann’s “fatal waste of labor and life at Antioch,” Charles Sumner ruing that Mann’s “last years would have been happier and more influential had he stayed at home” (that is, in Massachusetts), and Theodore Parker dismissively charging, “I don’t think Ohio was worthy of him, or could appreciate his worth” (qtd. in Straker

9). Mann's story, they complained, ended not with a bang in Boston, but with a Midwestern whimper. For students of writing assessment history, however, there is much more to be learned from Mann's Antioch anticlimax than these commentaries seem to suggest.

While Antioch College's first years under Horace Mann (1853-1859) may currently be a site "at the margins of historical consciousness" for writing assessment scholars, the school is nevertheless—as David Gold might say—"far from marginal" (*Rhetoric* ix). Indeed, as of Antioch's opening year in 1853, its admissions requirements included a writing assessment in English—and, for that matter, writing-based entrance examinations in all other required subject tests: Geography, History, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Latin, and Greek. This, a full *twenty years* before Harvard would put in place its first entrance examination in English composition. Adding new asterisks to the supposed assessment innovations at Harvard later in the century, Mann's immediate *successor* as President of Antioch College—Thomas Hill—was also Charles William Eliot's immediate *predecessor* as President of Harvard College, inviting us to question where and how writing assessment at Harvard benefits from Mann's downstream influence. While investigating this stream of influence calls for more attention than this dissertation can provide, the fact that this question has not yet been asked suggests to us how telling the (hi)story of assessment-rhetoric at Antioch College might aid us in remapping the field's historical memory—filling some of its gaps and empowering us to understand familiar events in revealingly unfamiliar ways.

To explore Antioch College's first decade under Mann is to encounter, at every turn, an experimental educational world coordinated by writing assessment and animated—as we will see—by phrenological fantasies of inclusion and improvement. Antioch was created with an attendant preparatory school, for which writing and writing assessment served as a curricular



through-line—each semester linked to the next by a chain of required rhetorical exercises, composition coursework, and capstone critical essays (*Catalogue of Antioch College...1854-5* 33-8). What’s more, Antioch’s *college* curriculum placed writing at the center not just of its formal rhetoric, belles-lettres, and English language courses, but—in fact—virtually every course the college offered. Aspiring applicants to Antioch, reading the college’s first course catalogue, would find all the college’s curricular offerings modified by the following categorical requirement: “RHETORICAL EXERCISES and English Compositions will be required, weekly, during the whole course” (qtd. in H. Mann, *Dedication* 140). Across the curriculum, Antioch was writing-intensive—with writing assessment positioned in every subject as a technology for stimulating and surveilling mental progress. Indeed, Mann believed that the race-writing potential of writing assessment extended far beyond its applications in the common school. College-level writing assignments at Antioch were, with few exceptions, subject to two overlapping systems of appraisal: assessment by instructor and assessment by peer.

Antioch’s founding years are remarkable not just for the ways the college centered student compositions, but for the ways its student body was composed. Antioch was founded to be a national example of socially-just, inclusive education. The second of the college’s “Articles of Incorporation”—following only a first article that formally names the school “Antioch College”—is one declaring that Antioch “shall afford equal privileges to students of both sexes” (*Articles of Incorporation* 1). Antioch’s first course catalogue identifies this sex inclusivity as a self-conscious departure “from most of the higher literary institutions of the country,” proudly declaring that Antioch

recognizes the claims of the female sex to equal opportunities of education with the male, and these opportunities it designs to confer. Its founders believe that labors and expenditures for the higher education of men will tend indirectly to elevate the character

of women; but they are certain that all wise efforts for the improved education of women will speed the elevation of the whole human race. (qtd. in H. Mann, *Dedication* 142)

While not the first non-sectarian college in the country to provide for the co-education of men and women, Antioch is remembered as the first to do so on a fully equal basis. At the time of Antioch's founding, Oberlin College could boast that its campus was co-educational (and had been so for years), but carved out separate courses of study for the sexes—and also disallowed women from publicly reading the commencement addresses they had composed (see, e.g., Abele; Buchanan; Welsch “Thinking”). Antioch's required courses of study were identical for men and women, and as of the college's first graduating class in 1857, both sexes shared the stage when delivering their commencement addresses.

Of the sixteen students enrolled in Antioch's first senior class (1856-1857), four were women: Mahalah Jay, Ann Adeline (“Ada”) Shepard, Achsae E. Waite, and Adaline Williams—the first of whom enrolled in Antioch with her husband, Eli, after the two abandoned their studies at the less sexually progressive Oberlin (Rury and Harper 493-6; Sanders, *Antioch* 14-5; Welsch, “Thinking” 14-5). Antioch opened as the first co-educational college in the country to extend a full professorship to a woman: Rebecca Mann Pennell, Horace Mann's niece, whose prior teaching appointment had been as a teacher educator at Westfield Normal College, in West Newton, Massachusetts. And, while the fact was neither enshrined in the college's Articles of Incorporations or its course catalogue, Antioch was, during its first decade, a racially-integrated campus, offering seats for black students—provided, that is, they prove themselves qualified to pass Antioch's stringent entrance requirements. College *composition*, then, was in multiple senses the cornerstone of “Horace Mann's Experiment” at Yellow Springs, Ohio.

In its efforts to advance opportunity and extend access to radically underserved student populations, Mann's experimental college presents the field of writing assessment with an early

emblem for what has emerged as one of its most pressing social justice preoccupations: inclusion. Few sites for social justice intervention have captured the imagination of writing assessment scholars as fully as the effort to leverage assessment to interrupt ongoing exclusionary practices in education—including those that prevent minoritized students from entering the college classroom in the first place. “Is the role of composition to gate-keep or provide access?” Keith Harms pointedly asks, adding, “If the latter, what role should language instruction play for non-white users of English? And what role should writing assessment play in making that determination?” (130). In this expanding literature on social justice and writing assessment, advocacy for inclusion—sometimes discussed under the banner of securing “opportunity to learn” for students (see, e.g., Elliot, “Theory”; Moss, Pullin, Gee, Haertel, and Young; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*)—has assumed many forms, including the adoption of an intentionally inclusive classroom pedagogy that is anti-oppressive or anti-racist in focus (e.g., Burns, Cream, and Dougherty; Inoue *Antiracist*; Sassi). Most often, though, questions of inclusion (or its opposite, exclusion) take as their target entrance or placement examination, which regulate and restrict educational access—and constrain, as some social justice scholars would put it, students’ opportunity to learn (Moreland; Poe and Cogan; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen; Toth).

For educators and scholars seeking to reconfigure inclusion through writing assessment, there is much to be gained by recovering Mann’s ostensible use of assessment to expand student access to Antioch in extraordinary ways—permitting, as it did, entrance for women *and* black students at a moment when neither had been extended the right to vote, and when slavery was still legal in both states immediately south of Ohio. Yet in modeling for us an upper limit for inclusivity in the antebellum period, the example of Antioch teaches us how regimes of

inclusion—even ones we might justly regard as extraordinary—can retain an exclusionary character. “Institutions (and their geographies) are powerfully rhetorical, and this rhetorical power shapes the bodies within these spaces,” Jay Dolmage claims (*Academic* 8). Assessments are a vector for this power, giving rhetorical voice to the institution’s aims, mouthing its preferences, and enunciating its judgments.

Recalling the epigraph for this chapter, any student whose entrance is conditional on passing an exam enters that institution as a stranger. This logic of inclusion is one in which “receiving a passing mark becomes synonymous with *passing* (i.e., approximations of able-bodiedness),” as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder might put it (88, emphasis in original)—yet with a phrenological twist. Traditionally, “passing” has been discussed as a form of strategic visibility, where a subject performs one identity (typically a contingently desirable or dominant one), so that another, more “authentic” subaltern identity can be invisibilized—a rhetoric of display allowing the actor to avoid censure or violence, and to “accrue cultural benefits” that would otherwise be denied (Tonn 349). Passing, as it would have been understood at Antioch, was a racial performance, but *not* a racial masquerade. Within Antioch’s institutional culture, passing an examination was a matter of racial screening, but with the goal of intra-racial sorting (testing progressive racial fitness) rather than inter-racial sorting (determining whether a student was white or non-white). To *pass* at Antioch was not to hide one’s racial essence but to reveal it on the page.

As a shorthand, we might call this system of scrutiny *phrenological passing*: Entrance examination at Antioch doubled as a test of mental health and racial fitness—a demonstration of racial character. We will see in sections below that phrenological passing, while principally invested in intra-racial distinctions, was in no way color-blind, and did not fundamentally disrupt

the white supremacy saturating Mann's thought. Phrenological passing co-operated alongside and inter-operated with this white supremacy, in the service of (re)composing the New Race of Americans. What we will find is this: Mann believed that the broad strokes of racial development were written on the skin, set in the bones, and etched into the phenotype—meaning that broad assumptions about mental development could be made at a glance. But the finer, more precise inward reading was to be made not of the skull or the face, but of the second skin of the page. And when these sites for inward reading told different stories about development, it was the testimony of this second skin that Mann trusted as the truer test of humanity.

Such a preference in no meaningful way makes Mann an antiracist. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Mann—like many in his phrenological circle—endorsed white supremacist understandings of black intellectual inferiority and was more than at peace with the segregation of black and white bodies. Yet we misunderstand the fantasy underwriting his assessment reforms and assessment-rhetorics if we displace Mann's white supremacy from its broader eugenic ecology of assumptions it participates in. At its core, Mann's race-writing effort was a kind of “war against the weak,” as Edwin Black might call it. White male bodies, too, were racially suspect to Antioch's phrenological inward eye (though as we will see, black bodies were certainly subjected to more intensive scrutiny). Their written bodies had to pass Antioch's test of humanity—and find themselves placed or denied entrance accordingly. Mann's anti-blackness and his ableism were two interoperating machines, powering his larger race-writing agenda. To restore this past to our historical memory of writing assessment is to help us understand how not just exclusion but also *inclusion* can be motivated by racist fantasies of belonging and progress.

To restore this episode in the story of writing assessment, I draw on a variety of archival sources that have been largely overlooked by historians. Developing a clear picture of writing

instruction and assessment from this time poses a historiographic challenge, in that the college's early faculty neither published nor provided for the preservation of their lecture notes or lesson plans. (One structural and material reason, perhaps, why so many of Harvard's compositionist heavies have attracted so much sustained scholarly interest is that they published extensively on the topic of their theories and practices—affording historians a virtual means of witnessing the composition work generated in and for these early courses.) Even so, several snapshots of Antioch's earliest years remain accessible. Mary Peabody Mann's biography of Horace Mann contains a meticulous record of Antioch's founding years, and seemingly all of Mann's formal public addresses as Antioch president were preserved in widely circulated publications.

Just as importantly, while none of the Antioch Faculty's lecture notes seem to have survived into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, Antioch's *students* have left behind a rich documentary record of instruction and assessment at Antioch in the form of their private letters, personal diaries, and published remembrances. Institutional records like course catalogues, college-related correspondences, and commencement announcements remain sitting on shelves and tucked away in nearly-forgotten folders, patiently awaiting recovery—along with three commencement addresses, written (and, in 1857, publicly delivered) by graduating seniors Ada Shepard, Eli Jay, and Mahalah Jay, respectively. Rummaging through the archives at Antioch and at Earlham College—a site where Eli and Mahalah later found employment as college professors—we find that a photograph of Antioch's first graduating class has survived (see fig. 8 below), as have daguerreotype likenesses that Mann would have regarded as more racially revealing: student writings by Mahalah Jay and Eli Jay, marked with instructor evaluations and accompanied by written assessments made by their classmates (and discussed at length in the next chapter).

Refracted through these fragments, Antioch’s assessment ecology comes into view—a grid of writing tasks intended both to exercise and externalize the developing student mind.



Fig. 8. Antioch Graduating Class, 1857 (“1<sup>st</sup> Graduating Class,” *Antiochiana*).<sup>61</sup>

Access and opportunity are, in themselves, important justice issues. But the inclusions facilitated by our writing assessments also matter because “the classroom shapes larger communities,” meaning that, for scholars, “[t]here is tremendous potential, and tremendous responsibility, ... to examine these buildings we work in, and how they are involved in building a larger social and public space outside of these walls (and gates and stairs)” (Dolmage *Academic* 8). Revisiting Antioch’s first years of operation presents us with a historically remarkable opportunity to consider how writing assessment has been underwritten by cultural narratives about racial progress—and how acts of assessment, in turn, reinforce and underwrite

those same narratives. As I will argue, to fully appreciate Antioch's inclusive antebellum assessment ecology, it is necessary for us to attend not only to assessment practices at Antioch, but the framing assumptions about race and progress that gave them their local meaning. In addition to recovering assessment methods piloted for the first time at Antioch—methods like entrance examinations in writing (discussed in this chapter) and co-educational peer assessment (discussed in the next)—we need to excavate the phrenological assessment-rhetoric *underwriting* and *underwritten* by those methods.

I begin below by restoring to our view the phrenological basis on which the college was founded (see also Tomlinson 286-300), describing the college's ties to leading phrenological thinkers, exploring the background experiences with phrenology that Antioch applicants brought with them to the college, and showing how Antioch's ostensible mission—elevating the moral character of its student body—was, appearances to the contrary, a eugenic strategy pursued by Mann. In short, I recover the phrenological meanings of Antioch *as an institution*. Having provided this background, I then proceed to discuss how writing assessment regulated entry to, and inclusion within, Antioch's experimental campus. Entrance examination—along with Antioch's system of end-of-course examinations—was used to bound and regulate inclusion at Antioch, sorting and selecting students on the basis of their linguistic fitness. Writing assessment at Antioch served to rhetorically vouchsafe the inner racial worth of two otherwise-suspect student bodies: women and African American students. Through a close reading of unpublished institutional documents, I recover the untold story of two African American sisters—Virginia and Fanny Hunster—who were nearly expelled from Antioch on racial grounds. Though Mann seems generally to have considered voluntary segregation a developmental good for black Americans (see Chapter 4), he ultimately intervened on the sisters' behalf, arguing that their



writings had earned them a place at the college. For Mann, the second skin of the page substitutes and supplements other dermal tests of humanity.

Following this chapter, the next provides an archival re-examination of theme writing and assessment at Antioch, revealing how instructor and peer criticisms of student essays bolstered Mann's progressive project at the college. Taken together, these chapters provide a complex portrait of the local uses and meanings college writing assessment could have in the underexplored decades prior to Harvard putting in place its entrance examination in English composition. Shifting and expanding the scope of our historical focus to include Antioch's assessment ecology aids us in understanding how concerns about race and ability enter the writing classroom earlier than existing historiography acknowledges, shaping the local meanings of writing assessment in unexpected ways. A generation of education historians, tracing the connections between mass education and eugenics in America, have prepared us to expect race betterment initiatives that take the form of segregating and *excluding* students, and that rank students through "objective" standardized tests (see, e.g., Lemann; Selden; Stein; Winfield, *Eugenics* and "Eugenic"; see also Tucker). Antioch's assessment ecology, by contrast, pursues racial progress through a racially- and sexually-*inclusive* writing classroom, in which subjective assessment instruments, like peer assessment, are employed, and the ranking of students (what Mann called "emulation") was forbidden. Racist projects can manifest in forms different from those our scholarship has prepared us to detect. Only through a close and careful engagement with the constructs that underwrite our writing assessment ecologies—our constructs of race, ability, writing, and progress—can we begin to make sense of the deeper social stakes of the practices we put in place or endorse. Returning to Antioch provides us one case study for

thinking through how constructs matter—showing us how an ostensibly anti-racist assessment ecology can still advance a broader racist social agenda. Beware phrenologists bearing gifts.

### **Of Phrenologists and Anti-Emulation Men: The Institution of Antioch**

Whenever we talk about inclusion, it is essential we consider also the guiding aims and ambitions of the institution granting entrance, access, and placement. The institutional decision to *include* a student body makes a claim about that body—but the precise nature of this claim is unintelligible, if we interpret it outside of the rhetorical context of the institution itself. “An institution,” Ahmed tells us, “is given when there is an agreement on what should be accomplished, or what it means to be accomplished” (24). Our recovery of entrance examination at Antioch must, therefore, begin with the mission coordinating institutional life at Antioch, providing the background for understanding what it means to be included—and who is deemed fit for inclusion. When we do so, we find that assessment and inclusion at Antioch College were not departures from Mann’s long-held phrenological commitments, but the realization of them. Given a free hand to build Antioch from the ground up, Mann could ensure his new college was “established on a ‘Phrenological’ basis.”<sup>62</sup> Scripture be damned, Mann was petrified by the prospect that the imbecilic and immoral, not the meek, might inherit the earth. After being screened by Antioch’s entrance examination—an initial stage eliminating those judged unfit for higher education—students admitted to the college were to be disciplined not only physically and intellectually, but morally. Through inclusion and the inculcation of virtue, writing instruction and assessment at Antioch was intended to save the world by saving the New American race from itself.

“To define or agree on the ends of an institution can ... shape what is taken for granted by it and within it,” Ahmed writes (24). The ends of Antioch were an end to race degeneration and the realization of human improvement; phrenology and its doctrines of fitness were taken for granted within its college grounds. To revisit Mann’s Antioch writings is to encounter, page after page, his ambition to reform higher education in accordance with what he believed to be the phrenological “constitution of man.” References to phrenological faculties like “causality” litter the lines of Mann’s presidential speeches (e.g., Mann, *Dedication* 20), and find their way even into the series of non-sectarian sermons he delivered at Antioch. Indeed, while Antioch was avowedly non-sectarian, the college was initially founded with the support of the Christian Connection, a religious sect that “believed in the right of private interpretation of the Scriptures, in the New Birth and in Christian character as the only tests of Christian fellowship” (Vallance 18).<sup>63</sup> A key part of Mann’s duties as Antioch President was to support the development of this Christian character in his college’s students—a task he took on, most overtly, by leading religious activities at Antioch.

Mann preached to his flock that humans were endowed by their creator with certain unalienable faculties, in the absence of which they would be incapable of surviving. “Without the Love of Life, or Vitativeness, as Phrenologists call it, man would not be fitted for a world like this,” he insisted (*Twelve Sermons* 257). The marriage, here, of the secular with the religious need not shock us. The vocabulary of phrenology was, Mann held, the language of practical Christianity (see also Tomlinson). To understand the organizational principles of the mind and the physiological needs of the body was to know—however obliquely—the practical will of God. To obey God’s plan for racial development, written into the human constitution, was to act morally. Mann equated this phrenology-informed understanding and obedience two-step as the

great, divine dance of “Civilization and Christianity”—terms he took to mean, respectively “*a Knowledge of the laws of God and an Obedience to them*” (*Twelve Sermons* 88, emphasis in original).

To illustrate the civilizational stakes involved in education, Mann fanned the twin flames of racial anxiety and animus, warning his audience that in the absence of institutions like Antioch, they would devolve to a state of savagery. “Abolish knowledge, and Ohio,—the Beautiful, as its name imports,—is again a wilderness, and your children degenerate into new tribes of Shawnees and Wyandots. But perfect education, and your children cannot but rise to an elevation, as yet unknown in your annals, and unpropheied in your hopes” (17-8). Colonialist, racist, and ableist logics converge. This *higher* state of (white Western) knowledge and intellectual ability was promised as an alternative to—and defense against—an imagined subaltern state of inferiority that Jay Dolmage has called “lower education,” against which “the ethic of higher education ... encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness” (*Academic* 3). The phrenology-laced promise of higher education, as Mann configured it, was pointedly a *racial* promise, reliant on fantasies of white Western civilizational supremacy. This progressive racial culture, however, was not fixed and given; it had to be continually recomposed, reproduced in students’ bodies through (re)inscribing it in their minds. The institutional mission of Antioch was to support this race-writing project.

Through his earlier efforts as Massachusetts’ Education Secretary, Mann had intended common schooling to raise the baseline of intelligence in the American public and, over the course of generations, eugenically eliminate physical and mental disabilities. College education played a complementary role in this race-writing project. In his *Dedication Address* as Antioch

President, Mann sketched for his assembled audience in Yellow Springs the connection of common schooling to college:

The Common School realizes all the facts, or fables, whichever they may be, of the Divining Rod. It tries its experiments over the whole surface of society, and wherever a buried fountain of genius is flowing in the darkness below, it brings it above, and pours out its waters to fertilize the earth. Among mankind, hitherto, hardly one person in a million has had any chance for the development of his higher faculties. ... The minds of the rest, though equally endowed with talent, genius and benevolence, have lain outside the scope of availability for good. ...

It is in this way that the Common School awakens talent, and sets it in motion. ... Then comes the function of a College, to guide, replenish and speed it on in its immortal career. (*Dedication*, 76-8)

It was Mann's particular conviction that higher education should cultivate the race's higher mental faculties—its *moral* faculties—by sponsoring the progress of a talented body of students, who would (after rigorous college training) return to common society prepared to morally uplift and govern those around them. Mann considered the principal demand of the age on colleges to be ensuring “an improvement in the conduct and moral habits of college students” (*Demands* 27). “It is the high function of a College,” he pronounced, “to act more or less upon all human interests and relations. A college acts upon youth, and hence its influences radiate wherever youth go, and that, in this country, is everywhere” (*Dedication* 32-3; see also Welsch, “Thinking” 19). Antioch's graduates were to constitute the mobile vanguard of progressive race-writing in the United States, spreading Civilization and practical Christianity in their wake.

Written entrance examination guarded the threshold of Antioch, barring entry of those mentally unfit for college coursework—with liminal cases redirected to Antioch's preparatory school, in the hope that its course of instruction might further awaken their talents. So seriously did Mann take the cultivation of his students' higher faculties that he personally oversaw the bulk of their senior year coursework, leading required courses in political economy, intellectual philosophy, and moral philosophy—courses for which his students composed essays on

phrenology, on civilization progress, and on the effects of corporal punishment in education. Before Mann was willing to certify his seniors as intellectually and morally fit for an Antioch degree, he first had to peer into their minds by assessing their writings. Included among the knowledges he expected to find there was the “intellectual philosophy” of Phrenology—a fact we revisit at greater length in the next chapter. Thus hand-picked and hand-trained by Mann—their racial characters critiqued, edited, and recomposed by his pedagogical interventions—Antioch’s graduates were to radiate their college’s race-writing effects throughout the country, authoring the nation of the coming age.

Mann was by no means the only phrenologist on the faculty. In a November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1852 letter to the Reverend Austin Craig—who would later serve as Antioch’s second Professor of Rhetoric, Logic and Belles Lettres (1857-58) and third President (1862-66)—Mann gleefully reported to his friend that during the college’s inaugural faculty meeting, he found himself working alongside ideologically kindred spirits: “a majority of us [are] believers in phrenology; all anti-emulation men—that is, all against any system of rewards and prizes designed to withdraw the mind from a comparison of itself with a standard of excellence, and to substitute a rival for that standard” (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 386; see also Tomlinson 291). Mann’s resistance to emulation as a motivational strategy in the classroom was, as we have seen, an organic extension of his belief that emulation fails to provide adequate racial development for the mass of students that education is intended to serve (see Chapter 3). At best, emulation disadvantages less developed students while securing mental progress for those who enter the classroom intellectually superior to their peers—though even for these beneficiaries of emulation, there is some danger that their ostensible success in answering questions is the function of superficial, rather than deep, mental inscriptions. If students learn only for the sake of competition and

prizes, they might end up inhabiting a state Mann called “polished imbecility”—able to parrot correct answers without comprehending why answers were correct, and without having received the mental exercise that comes with fully encountering a challenging idea.

To these intellectual hazards of emulation, Mann additionally considered emulation a moral threat, with competition in the classroom blunting students’ sympathies for their peers and, perhaps, encouraging the spread of moral imbecility. “In regard to motives,” Mann bragged, “we use in Antioch College no artificial stimulus. We have no system of prizes, or honors, or place-takings. We appeal to no dissocial motive, where the triumph of one competitor involves the defeat of another. . . . We would not cultivate the intellect at the expense of the affections, — what the world calls greatness, at the expense of goodness” (*Demands*, 24-5). Cultivation of both the mental and the moral faculties would be necessary, if Antioch was to preserve its student body against the dysgenic, biopolitical dangers of feeble-mindedness, polished imbecility, and moral idiocy.

### **Opportunity for Progress: Antioch’s Phrenologically-Minded College Body**

Antioch College’s early phrenological ties extended far beyond the Yellow Springs city-line; its institutional experiment, supported privately and publicly by a network of phrenological personalities. During Mann’s years as Antioch’s president, he sent letters abroad to his phrenological forefather George Combe, updating him on the state of the school, urging him to visit (or come to live in) Yellow Springs—and, at times, requesting financial support for the college. “How can I forget you who have done my mind more good than any other living man,— a hundred times more?” Mann tenderly, reverentially wrote to Combe in a May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1856 letter: “I not only think of you, remembering you, but, in a very important and extensive sense, *I am*

*you*. You are reproduced in my views of life....” (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 484, emphasis in original). Geographically closer to home, Mann also cultivated a professional relationship with the United States’ leading phrenological publishing house, Boston’s Fowlers and Wells Company—headed by Samuel Roberts Wells and brothers Lorenzo Niles Fowler and Orson Squire (“O. S.”) Fowler, the latter of whom was arguably America’s foremost home-grown phrenologist.

It was Fowlers and Wells that published Mann’s 1854 Antioch-centric speech *The Demands of the Age on Colleges*—circulated by them both in monograph form, and in excerpts printed in their flagship periodical, the *American Phrenological Journal*. This same periodical had, shortly before Antioch opened, run a piece advertising Mann’s experimental college, telling their readers that the “new Institution bids fair to become one of the best colleges in the country”—and that those in Yellow Springs hoping to purchase more texts by Fowlers and Wells will find them “kept for sale at Antioch College, at New York Price” (“Antioch College” 129). Mann even personally campaigned for campus visitations from the Fowlers and Wells leadership, writing in letter to Samuel R. Wells, “It would afford me great pleasure to see you here” (Horace Mann to Samuel R. Wells, 10 June 1856). After a fashion, these wishes appear to have been granted: O. S. Fowler himself made the trip to Yellow Springs, apparently to attend the college’s first commencement ceremonies. Before he had left, Fowler had delivered lectures and met with Antioch’s students (A. Shepard, *Papers*, Diary Entries for 25 May 1857, 27 May 1857), and performed phrenological assessments of at least two graduating seniors—Eli and Mahalah Jay—leaving them each with a written report, a phrenological exit examination of sorts, informing them of their predestined powers and job prospects in the world after Antioch (see Sanders, “Songs”).



It would be a mistake to think, however, that Antioch's faculty and external network of supporters were the only phrenologically-minded members of the college ecology. We have every indication that students applied to Antioch hoping to take part in the school's practical Christianity and benefit mentally and morally from the race-writing opportunities the institution was founded to offer. As one of mid-nineteenth-century America's most popular philosophies of mind, phrenology was very much a part of the rhetorical ecology in which Antioch's students came of age. The word "phrenology" could be found throughout popular American print culture: blazoned across the covers of best-selling books; casually referenced in speeches by leading thinkers and displayed in mainstream journals and newspapers; crammed in advertisements, advice columns, and letters to the editor; even plastered on storefront signs, marketing the availability of in-person head readings. It should be expected, then, that no small number of applicants to Antioch would have been at least passingly familiar with phrenology—and with the fact that the college's celebrity president was a self-avowed phrenologist.

Some of the college's students, like Ada Shepard, were personally acquainted with Mann and his beliefs from their overlapping social worlds, and shared time spent in Massachusetts. Shepard had, during her time at Westfield Normal School, been a student of Mann's niece, Rebecca Pennell, and had met Mann personally (see Abele). A glancing knowledge of Mann's phrenological beliefs might well be expected even from a student who had no direct contact with Mann prior to trying her (written) hand at Antioch's exacting entrance examinations. After all, Mann's phrenological commitments and eugenic theory of progress—while seldom discussed today—were not hidden in his writings and would have been sufficiently obvious to any of his contemporary readers. (This readership included Mahalah and Eli Jay, who kept a copy of Mann's 1852 *Poor and Ignorant, Rich and Ignorant: Two Lectures* in their private library.)<sup>64</sup>

When prospective Antioch students wrote to Mann, expressing an interest to be examined for entrance to his new college because they had (as one applicant claimed) read Mann's "Lectures to Young Men & some other works" and felt "much stimulated to make the most of this short life by cultivating my natural powers," we do them no disservice by taking seriously the prospect that they *had* actually read Mann's writings, and found compelling the prospect of phrenologically-informed education outlined in them. We gain some sense of these students' background engagements with phrenology when we zoom out to consider the experiences of Ada Shepard and Eli Jay prior to their education at Antioch.

In researching the writerly life of Mahalah Jay (née Pearson), before and during Mahalah's time as a student in Antioch's first graduating class, writing studies historian Kathleen Ann Welsch shows that Mahalah and Eli Jay subscribed to beliefs about mental culture consistent with Mann's, years prior to their successful entrance examinations at Antioch. Their "courtship letters describe education ... as a means of rising above 'mental imbecility' through the development of enlightened minds capable of seeing the work of God in all things, both mental and material," Welsch finds ("Thinking" 37 n.2). For his part, Eli could also boast intensive training in phrenological precepts from the brief period he spent in 1848 as a student at Farmer's College in College Hill, Cincinnati Ohio, where the young scholar read—and wrote extensively about—the works of George Combe and articles published in Fowlers and Wells's *American Phrenological Journal*. Documenting these curricular experiences in his personal journal from this year, Eli notes how central the finer points of phrenology were to his "Mental Science" coursework under Farmer's College President Freeman G. Cary. Through the animated classroom conversations facilitated by Cary, Eli gleaned "that a considerable number of the students incline to a belief in Phrenology as a science of mind," a club to which he was happy to

declare himself a member (“Eli Jay’s Personal Journal, 1848” 63). “To me,” he confessed to his journal, “phrenology appears to be the true exponent of mental science,” adding that “I cannot but look upon Phrenology as a more truthful, clearer, and easier comprehended system than mere abstractions can possible [sic] present” (“Eli Jay’s Personal Journal, 1848” 63)—a disposition that would equip him well for coursework under President Mann.

The diary left behind by Ada Shepard gives us some sense for how phrenology and entrance examination both, in their own ways, shaped the cultural context within which students imagined their own opportunities to learn. As Shepard documents, she spent a gap year between her studies at the Westfield Normal School and applying for admission to Antioch in 1854 (she entered as a sophomore), declining a temporary teaching post in favor of readying herself for Antioch’s stringent, multi-day entrance examination (A. Shepard, *Papers*; see also Abele 4; N. Green 34). Through Algebra and Geography exercises, Shepard strengthened her faculties of calculation and causality (as Mann would, in phrenological terms, think of them); she disciplined her mind by translating Greek and Latin classics, from Homer and Herodotus to Cicero and Virgil. (Naturally, her regimen also included essential work of practicing her English prose through the very discipline of maintaining her daily diary.) “I long with eagerness to be in Ohio,” she wrote in her diary entry for September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1853, “and yet I have so much to do in preparation, that sometimes I feel almost discouraged, no not discouraged, for I *will not* feel so, but disheartened for the time” (*Papers*, emphasis in original).<sup>65</sup> Taking a break from these efforts on a trip to Boston, Shepard found herself indulging—spontaneously—in a popular practice she found near to hand: phrenological skull assessment. She details in her December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1853 diary entry that, “Passing by Fowler’s Phrenological Establishment, I thought I would go in and see

about having my head examined. I did so, and concluded to have it done, so Mr. Butler commenced" (*Papers*, emphasis in original)

Anticipating a species of worry Horace Mann would later pester Shepard with at Antioch, Mr. Butler warned his young examinee about the risks entailed by her slender bodily frame: "he said was that my brain was too large for my body, and hence great care of my health was necessary" (A. Shepard, *Papers*, Diary Entry for 1 Dec. 1853). Without proper self-maintenance, Butler's analysis implies, bodily infirmity could sabotage the great mental potential portended by her sizable skull. Physical imbecility could fell even the most powerful intellect. Taking the measure of Shepard's mind through her cranial bumps and curves, Butler rattled off her hereditary talents, identified her dominant and feeble faculties, and even advised her on her future romances—devoting roughly equal attention to the psychology of her sexual prospects and the psychological prospects demarked by her sex. "He told me that I was capable of great excellence in scholarship," Shepard's entry continues,

particularly in Mathematics and Languages, also in Mental philosophy. He spoke of my great firmness and perseverance, and also said that I had much ambition and enterprise, but that my great defects, phrenologically, were want of self-esteem and combativeness.

He told me that if I should ever love, I should do so with my whole soul, and that great caution was necessary with regard to the person whom I might choose, as when once in love I should love forever.

The sentimentality of this last point appealed to Shepard's romantic self-image, and she found her phrenologist's inward reading to be, in the main, a fair assessment. Shepard questioned the quality of Butler's reading only to the extent she believed he "over-estimated my powers greatly," citing the high marks given to her for rhetorical aptitude. Ironically—perhaps even self-consciously—leaning in to the charge that she was deficient in self-esteem, Shepard objected to Butler's judgment "that I possessed a considerable conversational talent, which every one who

had heard my blundering and clumsy attempts at expressing ideas not less worthless than the manner of their utterance, knows to be untrue.”

Suggestively, Shepard voiced reservations about Butler’s phrenological appraisal—an assessment of her innate capacities and predilections, as predestined by the size and shape of her skull—only when its hermeneutic reach extended to her facility with words. However accurately a head reading could recognize the general capacities walled away behind her commendably large skull, Shepard would need further evidence and expert examination before she would cease doubting the quality of her ideas, or the manner in which she was capable of expressing them. As fate would have it, this first phrenological assessment would not be Shepard’s last. The assessment ecology at Antioch would not only provide Shepard and her classmates a form of regular phrenological scrutiny, but would also—Mann believed—expand students’ intellectual and moral faculties through the regular (written) exercise provided by classroom composition. Mann’s educational agenda was, after all, predicated on extending the hermeneutic reach of inward reading in ways the crude skull measurements offered at Fowler’s Phrenological Establishment could only, unconvincingly, hint at. Mental ability and language use were connected, but Mann reversed the interpretative polarity at work in traditional craniometry, like Butler’s measurements of Shepard’s skull, by reading written performance as a sign of the abilities shielded from view by the skull, rather than the other way around. To get a true measure of the developing mind, it is necessary to consult the daguerreotype likeness of it represented in writing. By editing and improving that externalized likeness, eliciting—with each assignment—progressive improvement on the page, the college instructor would be eliciting heritable mental progress, rewriting the race through writing assessment.

## Screening and Sorting Students: Written Entrance Examination at Antioch

The first step in this road to improvement, though, was the entrance examination. At the top of the “Requisites for Admission” listed in Antioch’s course catalog is an examination in *English Grammar*—a term treated by Mann as a catch-all for the rudiments of English language writing, including compositions that were a sentence or longer (see Chapters 2 and 3). English Grammar was, among the subject tests, *primus inter pares*—the first among what were (on paper) equal exams, listed first in the course catalog and administered first in the examination sequence. Technical proficiency in English was to be demonstrated before any further examination took place. A rudimentary command of the English mother tongue was a baseline requirement for admission even to Antioch’s preparatory school, and the writing-intensive nature of its college curriculum—driven by rhetorical exercises and English compositions—made it necessary to test the applicants’ writing proficiency, before and above anything else. Out of all the subject tests, only this writing examination receives an explanatory footnote, sketching how student performance was to be scored: “In the examination,” it reads, “particular attention will be paid to Orthography and Punctuation” (qtd. in H. Mann, *Dedication* 135).

This general scoring protocol suggests a continuity with the 1845 Boston common school examinations, which were similarly focused on the formal features of short student writings—finding hidden stores of meaning in surface features of writing, in much the way phrenologists like O. S. Fowler might read a person’s developmental history and future potential in the topography of her head. Within their local, phrenological context, even the most mundane features of writing could disclose evolutionary depths, when submitted to inward reading. In every well-punctuated bump can be read a capacity for order, precision, and memory. Every skull-like word contains within it even more *significance* than the *thing* that word signifies:

Every well-chosen, correctly-spelled word contains also the history of instruction and mental exercise that made its composition possible. Instruction and exercise are tantamount to progressive mental growth, heritable by future generations—a brighter racial future, spelled out feats of orthography. And, what was more revealing, surface-level errors on the page spoke volumes about the sad mental habits and hygiene that produced them—every disfigured word or sentence, a graphic reminder of the mental disorder and disuse that composed it.

Indeed, even a cursory consideration of Antioch’s written entrance examination alongside the 1845 daguerreotype likenesses of Boston’s grammar and writing schools reveals striking facial similarities between them. Writing was, by Mann’s account, the assessment technology of the future, and assessment at Antioch built on the 1845 examination innovations he had worked to popularize as Massachusetts Secretary of Education. Both the Boston and Yellow Springs written examinations involved a series of discrete subject-specific tests, one part of which was a test of writing, under the guise of English Grammar.<sup>66</sup> And both of these examinations were imagined to provide authoritative, objective bases for measuring mental development; this, because in completing their examinations, students were inadvertently authoring a peculiarly revealing psychological object: a phrenological digest that would expose their inner developmental impressions, and resultant racial worth. Yet if the Antioch entrance examinations and the Boston common school examinations were alike in several structural senses, they nevertheless were put to radically different institutional uses. The 1845 Boston examinations provided Mann (and his colleagues, like Samuel Gridley Howe) an occasion to call for improvements to common school instruction, with the goal of raising the level of education common to all school children. Inverting this focus, Antioch treated the mental photography of written examination as a means of ranking, sorting, and selecting students—*screening* their inner

mental abilities for inward reading and *screening out* those students deemed developmentally unfit for higher education. At Yellow Springs, the goal was less to culture all students in common, than to identify which students were so uncommon as to be capable of the highest levels of culture. The results of Antioch's first entrance examinations are instructive in this regard. While two hundred or so applicants were examined, only 8 were judged developmentally fit for college-level instruction at Antioch—a ferociously restrictive acceptance rate of around 4 percent.<sup>67</sup>

The entrance examinations at Antioch under Horace Mann materially diverge from the more famous 1845 Boston common school examination in at least one more crucial way. The documentary record for the 1845 examinations is expansive and detailed, containing questions from the examinations and sample student answers in the formal reports penned by Mann's lieutenants in the school Examining Committees. In sharp contrast, Antioch's entrance examinations survive in a more abstract and fragmentary fashion, their contours sketched in student recollections and course catalogues, scattered across surviving school ephemera, glancingly captured in passing observations and stray passages in the writings of Horace and Mary Peabody Mann. The examination questions themselves have receded from our critical reach—as have the student writings submitted in response to them.<sup>68</sup> Yet even without original test documents from Antioch's early years, it remains possible for us to reconstruct this early college entrance examination, triangulating student accounts with contemporaneous institutional documentation preserved in the archives of Antioch College's Olive Kettering Library. Luckily for the present-day historian, the examination was so memorably grueling that more than one student from Antioch's earliest classes created a personal record of the experience. Additionally, Antioch's course catalog identifies a text where exam questions might have been drawn from:



Richard Green Parker's *Progressive Exercises in English Composition*, both required texts in Antioch's preparatory school coursework. Pieced together through these partial accounts and artifacts, the early entrance examinations at Antioch begin to come into focus.

In an 1853 letter to his sister, James De Normandie, Jr. detailed how, shortly after arriving in Yellow Springs, he was confronted by “that examination which had caused me so much anxiety,” a battery of tests that stretched from Thursday morning through Saturday afternoon (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853).<sup>69</sup> The precocious De Normandie—who, at 17, would join Antioch college's first class as its youngest member (see Totten 11)—began his examination self-assured in his readiness for instruction at Antioch, only to feel his icy confidence melt away. “When I left home I thought I was fully prepared to enter, or of course I would not have applied,” De Normandie assures his sister, “but when the first day of examination was over and I began to see how closely we were to be examined, I almost was certain I should not be admitted” (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853). As we will find, De Normandie's cause for concern was not the English Grammar *per se*, which he claims to have made short work of. Instead, it was the cumulative, comprehensive nature of the exam that seemed to stretch his wits to their breaking point. Of the test in English Grammar itself—the first administered, at 9 A.M. on Thursday—De Normandie told his sister, “These questions were simple and few in number. I soon answered them and before ten o'clock was through for the morning” (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853).

Of course, entrance decisions were not made on the basis of the English Grammar test alone. To appreciate the contextual importance of this subject test, we must understand it in its context as one part of the overall examination—and perhaps also as a predicate for those subject tests to come, several of which were similarly reliant on English language writing. Finishing the

English Grammar test in under an hour, De Normandie remembers himself as being among the first applicants to complete the English Grammar exam. “The remaining candidates soon came out and we had much sport talking of our slight examination and supposed we would have nothing harder, but when the afternoon arrived we found our great mistake,” he writes (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853). English Grammar was followed by a mathematical test on Arithmetic, algebra, and geometry that “lasted until Friday afternoon,” at which point students were assessed in Modern and Ancient Geography (“12 questions in the first and 16 in the second”), before continuing—on Saturday—to complete “22 questions in Ancient history” and then a two-part “lingual exam” inspecting Latin and Greek language proficiencies (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853).<sup>70</sup> If Mann’s 1845 examinations provide any kind of precedent for how these other subject tests at Antioch were scored (see Chapter 3), the geography and history questions may have doubled as tests of English language facility—with substantial errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization on these written answers providing grounds to penalize student writers. Whatever the case where these tests were concerned, De Normandie notes that the margin for error on each entrance examinations subject test was thin: “We are marked on a scale of eight and I believe the rule is, that as many as we miss are to be taken from it without we miss four, when we are marked ‘O’” (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853).

English Grammar was, in its way, not just the first but also the most rudimentary of the required assessments—a developmental baseline De Normandie would likely have been examined against several times before, from his adolescence in Grammar School onward. Yet we have cause to take De Normandie’s comments on the ease of the English Grammar test with a grain of salt, considering that his success was not uniformly shared by even those happy few

students deemed worthy to enter Antioch during its first decade. (To say nothing of the large body of applicants who, on the basis of the poor performance on this and other subject tests, were denied entry to the college—screened out after their writings were screened for errors.) Indeed, students who acquitted themselves admirably on the majority of the entrance examination’s subject tests could receive a *conditional* admission.<sup>71</sup> With the blessing of the Antioch’s faculty, otherwise promising students could be “admitted on condition of passing a satisfactory examination at an early day” on the subjects they had failed during their entrance examination—and at least one student was granted conditional admission to the college having failed *only* the English Grammar test (Faculty Records, Antioch College, 9 Sept. 1859).<sup>72</sup>

Such, at least, was the case for freshman-level entrance examination. The record is less clear about the required entrance examinations for students intending to enter Antioch as sophomores or upper classmen—though the college’s course catalog warns potential examinees that, “For admission to any advanced class, the applicant must submit to an examination in the studies of the previous class, or classes” (qtd. in *Dedication* 140). Our best indication of what this process might have specifically involved comes from the letters of Ada Shepard, who entered Antioch in 1854 as a sophomore after spending the better part of the preceding year studying for the college’s entrance examination. We have reason to believe that the examination process for entrance at this level may have involved not merely an English Grammar examination, but an impromptu English theme paper written to demonstrate mastery of freshman-level composition. This, at least, was something Professor Rebecca Pennell (Mann’s niece) teased her former student Shepard about, after the latter had completed her mathematics exam—initially thought by Shepard to be the last subject test required. “Miss Pennell persists in declaring that she will tell Prof. Doherty, the teacher in Rhetoric . . . that I am anxious to be

examined by him, and have a strong desire to write a composition for him. Just imagine my state of mind if he should really compel me to do it!” Shepard complains (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 7 September 1854). There, her account leaves off, and Shepard does not follow up on this possibility, save to note that “Miss P. seemed in earnest, and I am afraid she will execute her threat, in spite of my vehement protestations.” That Rebecca Pennell would playfully needle her former student in this way reveals to us more than a professor’s apparent confidence in her once-and-future student’s success.<sup>73</sup> This episode suggests also that on-demand English theme composition was, as of 1854, coming to be thought of as (at least a potential) test for entrance examination—and one sufficiently arduous or intellectually revealing to make its imposition a suitably playful threat.

Returning to the more general case of freshman-level entrance examination, we gain some sense of the questioning likely involved in the English Grammar subject test when we consult Parker’s *Progressive Exercises*—the writing textbook first assigned to students entering Antioch’s preparatory school—which contains sample grammatical exercises for assessing students, and also sketches a psychology of composition that guided Antioch’s professors in teaching and assessing their students’ writings. Parker’s best-selling series of English textbooks—which, in addition to his secondary school-level *Progressive Exercises* (1832), included the college-level *Aids to English Composition* (1844) and *Exercises in Rhetorical Reading* (1849)—is best remembered in writing studies historiography through the scholarship of Robert Connors, who held up Parker’s *Aids* as “a *locus classicus* of the textbook meant for use by exceedingly uninformed teachers” (Connors, “Textbooks” 185), and denounced his *Progressive Exercises* as chock-full of assignments that “were completely, utterly, relentlessly impersonal” (Connors, “Personal” 171; cf. Welsch, “Thinking”).<sup>74</sup> Whatever truth we find in

these criticisms of Parker's textbooks as pedagogical instruments, we can conclude that as models for entrance examination at Antioch, Parker's exercises would have been intensely *personal* in a different sense, providing a surface on which test-takers' inner mental characters could be inwardly read. Personal, because a test of full personhood—of phrenological passing. Moreover, as I show in this chapter, the influence of Parker's *Progressive Exercises* can be felt also in the system of writing assessment at the heart of Antioch's early curriculum, with both professors and peers echoing Parker's pronouncements about writing quality, and how to properly criticize it.

The "Grammatical Exercises" recommended by Parker in the (revised and expanded) 1846 edition of his *Progressive Exercises*—the last major update to the text before Antioch opened—took the form of demands that students write one or more sentences that fit within specific grammatical parameters: containing particular parts of speech, written in a particular mood, or cast in a particular tense. "Write a sentence containing a participle and a preposition, with an active verb and its object," Parker commands (18). Robert Connors notes that questions of this kind were novel at the time. He identifies Samuel S. Greene (author of the 1847 *Greene's Analysis*) as "the first important grammarian to include original sentence writing as part of each of his grammar lessons" (*Composition-Rhetoric* 118)—though as of the 1846 revision of his *Progressive Exercises*, Parker had a full section of his textbook devoted to sentence composing work of this kind. One sentence stem begins, "Write several sentences containing one or more of each of the following particulars:—" leaving the rest of its request to the judgment of teachers, providing them a list of 13 options to mix and match when examining their students (19). Questions like these bear a striking resemblance to those asked of students on the "Grammar" subtest for the 1845 Boston common school examinations (see Chapter 3), and with good cause:

Parker's textbook was likely a source of inspiration for those examinations as well. By the time Mann assumed office as the Secretary of Education in Massachusetts in 1837, Parker's *Progressive Exercises* had been adopted by Boston's School Committee as a textbook in the city's public schools, where it provided the backbone of classroom grammar instruction—and furnished a model for examination.<sup>75</sup>

If prompted to write responses to test items like these on the Antioch entrance examination, applicants would have been scored—on each question—along multiple axes. A correct answer would require both that students compose sentences with the specified elements in them, and also—per the Antioch course catalog—that these sentences are correct in “Orthography and Punctuation,” making it possible for students to be penalized for spelling errors on what would otherwise be an appropriate response. As with the 1845 Boston common school examinations, Antioch's English Grammar subject test allowed for examiners to register multiple, overlapping forms of student error—each written answer, a potential archive of mental underdevelopment. These questions would have allowed, too, for the comparison of the *substantive* content of student answers (whether they responded appropriately to the prompt) with their *formal* content (whether answers were defaced with errors in spelling and punctuation)—providing examiners an aperture through which to see how extensively students' minds had been exercised. An answer that was substantively correct but blighted with formal errors might suggest that examinees had been disciplined using low motives like fear or emulation, testifying to missed opportunities for race-writing in that student's past pedagogical experience. James De Normandie may have regarded the English Grammar exam as only manageably difficult, but by Mann's lights, students like De Normandie succeeded because they enjoyed the developmental benefits of proper mental inscription.

### **“Requisites for Admission”**

Mann’s reasons for requiring this multi-part written exam—with its novel inclusion of English Grammar—appear to have included interlocking practical, status, and eugenic considerations. Practically, the subject tests of this examination corresponded to the four pillars of the Antioch curriculum: Mathematics, Classical Languages, History and Geography, and English composition. Success on these subject tests was therefore believed a predicate for rigorous (and often writing-intensive) coursework.<sup>76</sup> In this, Mann sought to establish standards for Antioch that would match or exceed those found at the nation’s top colleges, like Harvard, which at the time tended to examine prospective students on their studies of Latin, Greek, Math, and History.<sup>77</sup> A side-by-side comparison of the 1853-1854 entrance examination requirements for Harvard and Antioch tells this tale (see figs. 9 and 10, respectively), revealing a substantial overlap in the kinds of texts students were expected to study and master (e.g., Worcester’s *Elements* for the respective history examinations), and highlighting that the English Grammar examination at Antioch operated as an expectation in excess of those commonly examined by more established schools.

By adding this requirement for vernacular language performance as early as 1853, Mann’s antebellum entrance examination at Antioch symbolically placed English on the same curricular footing as more august subjects like Latin—a move that, when taken seriously, complicates some of the narratives that have emerged in recent decades to explain why entrance examination in English composition found its way into college life. The emergence of entrance examination in English language writing—along with the emergence of “modern” composition studies, generally—are often explained as a function of post-Civil War demographic shifts, and attendant class and social realignments. “Classical education was challenged after the Civil War,

when demographic changes and new cultural pressures threatened to put the old colleges out of business,” Sharon Crowley tells us (*Composition* 54). Susan Miller summarizes well these pressures typically imagined to have brought new waves of students crashing against the academy’s gates, and curricular shifts inside them: “Western expansion, post-Civil War dislocations and unease, industrialization, ‘the impact of science’ (Parker 347), and the 1862 Morrill Act establishing land grant universities all placed American higher education in a new aspect toward its constituencies” (*Textual* 48). Within Harvard’s Eliot-era curriculum, it was hoped that elevation of English-language vernacular and literary training “could perhaps instill in the nonelect the necessary refinements of taste, in the form of correct grammar and spelling, two historically important signs of cultured propriety that Harvard’s way of teaching composition was going to provide” (52).

Yet even if this is a fair account of English’s rise at Harvard under Eliot, the importance of writing instruction and assessment at Antioch under Mann points to additional motives for a curricular realignment around English composition—motives that precede and potentially underpin those Miller identifies in the Harvard context. Antioch appears, from its inception, to have been designed to serve the needs of a middle class student population who had successfully navigated their common schools. To the extent Mann’s embrace of English served as a kind of strategic outreach to the “nonelect,” it is worth remembering that Mann rejected the idea that the upper classes were the intellectual or moral betters of those who made up America’s common middle mass—provided that common men and women were extended meaningful opportunities for educational culture. He believed, in fact, that the privately-educated scions of the upper class had a distressingly high chance of being little more than polished imbeciles.



## REQUISITES FOR ADMISSION.

CANDIDATES for admission to the Freshman Class are examined in the following books.

## LATIN DEPARTMENT.

The whole of Virgil,  
The whole of Caesar's Commentaries,  
Cicero's Select Orations, Folsom's or Johnson's edition,  
Andrews and Stoddard's Latin Grammar, including Prosody,  
And in writing Latin.

## GREEK DEPARTMENT.

Felton's Greek Reader,  
Sophocles's Greek Grammar, including Prosody,  
And in writing Greek with the Accents.

## MATHEMATICAL DEPARTMENT.

Davies's or Chase's Arithmetic,  
Euler's Algebra, or Davies's First Lessons in Algebra, to "The Ex-  
traction of the Square Root,"  
And "An Introduction to Geometry and the Science of Form, pre-  
pared from the most approved Prussian Text-Books," as far as the  
Seventh Section, "Of Proportions."

## HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT.

Worcester's Elements of History,\*  
Worcester's Geography.\*

\* The *Ancient History* and *Ancient Geography* are the parts of these books which are required. Here, as in all other cases, equivalents for the prescribed text-books, if real equivalents, are accepted.

Fig. 9. Entrance examination requirements for Harvard for the 1853-1854 school year (A *Catalogue...Harvard* 23).

## REQUISITES FOR ADMISSION.

Candidates for admission to the FRESHMAN CLASS, will be examined in the following Studies : \*

## ENGLISH GRAMMAR. †

## OUTLINES OF ANCIENT AND MODERN GEOGRAPHY.

HISTORY. Miss Peabody's Polish-American System of Chronology ; or Worcester's Elements.

## ARITHMETIC.

ALGEBRA. Loomis's Elements, or its Equivalent.

GEOMETRY. Loomis's first five Books, or their equivalent.

## LATIN. Bullions' Grammar.

" Reader.

" Caesar's Commentaries, two Books.

" Cicero's Orations, the four against Catiline, and the one for the Poet Archias.

" Sallust, Catiline's Conspiracy.

Schmitz & Zumpt's Virgil's *Aeneid*, the first six Books, with Prosody and Scanning.  
Latin Composition.

## GREEK. Bullions' Grammar.

" Reader.

" Gospel according to John.

" Greek Composition.

\* Applicants wishing to pursue the ELECTIVE COURSE will not be examined in the Studies preparatory to those they propose to omit.

† In the examination, particular attention will be paid to Orthography and punctuation.

Fig. 10. Entrance examination requirements for Antioch for the 1853-1854 school year (H. Mann, *Dedication* 135).

Class privilege made it all too easy to squander the gifts of education, and as often as not, the middle class's social superiors were their inferior in mental capacity and bodily health.

Taking life across the pond as his example, Mann claimed,

The talent and genius that now adorn and glorify England, in art, in science, in poetry, in eloquence, in statesmanship, are but the harvest-home of beauty and strength, that were engendered and elaborated, in years gone by, from hard labor, wholesome food, and unenervating habits, in what are there called the middle ranks of life. ... Hence wealthy and luxurious parents may dote and yearn over their sons, as they please; they may surround them with a crowd of masters in every science and art, *fill their pockets with college diplomas*, and crown them with the accomplishments of foreign travel; and, when all this is done, the stalwart youth from the country hill-sides, ... these hardy sons of Toil and Temperance, I say, will overmatch the puny offspring of ease and opulence in every competition for the prizes of wealth, honor, or fame. (*A Few Thoughts...Woman* 108-10, emphasis mine)

So while entrance examination may have furnished Mann with a filtration mechanism, screening and sorting students on their language use, it would be a mistake to say that Mann was working to raise the mental attainments of middle class students to match the level of their privately educated betters. Mann had other reasons for requiring English-language writing assessment.

It is here that we should recall how Mann understood English language use in racial, developmentalist terms (see Chapter 2). This is a necessary backdrop for understanding why and how written English came to structure Antioch's institutional requirements for phrenological passing. English was a race-writing language of progress; *writing* it provided a powerful prosthesis for externalizing and refining thought. As the mother tongue common to white Americans, English was closely associated in Mann's mind with white racial progress. Amy Zenger teaches us that when "[c]onceived as the mother tongue, ... language becomes more than a useful tool for communication; ... [t]he mother tongue functions to bond its speakers into a distinct community across geographical boundaries; it also unities its speakers across time, connecting living speech with history" (335). As Mann imagined it, English had—quite

literally—encoded into it the cultural history, achievement, and potential of the Anglo-Saxon race (see Chapter 2). From his earliest days as Massachusetts’ Education Secretary, Mann also championed the idea that the trained use of correct English—like disciplinary engagement with Latin and Greek—provided an important source of mental exercise. He described English language writing as a kind of “mental measurement,” with composition being—at its core—taking the measure of reality through words and strengthening the mind through this intellectual labor (see Chapter 2). The mind grows stronger—and heritably so—when we compose, when we pattern our thoughts in accordance with English language grammar, and when we root out imperfections in thought by purifying the language through which one thinks.

Periodically throughout his career, Mann took the time to trumpet his belief that the cognitive benefits of English—through access to progressive (white) cultural knowledges, and through the latent mental discipline English language use provided—would gradually improve its users in body and mind, eradicating idiocy and bodily imperfections, and leaving in their place the attributes of an Apollonian master race. Mann recoiled at the thought of what would happen to humanity in the absence of English. Written English, then, structures the “requisites for admission” at Antioch in part because Mann believed it also, in multiple senses, constituted a requisite for admission to full, progressive humanity. The words and structures that make up a language bounded the kinds of things that could be thought. Mental capacity and the conditions for racial progress were intimately bound up in the language used to speak, read, listen, and write. To teach English to the masses was to provide them access to the cultural insights accumulated in the forward march of civilization; to teach them to write English was to afford them the highest level of participation in this progressive cultural enterprise.

## **Placement at Antioch: Being Held Up to the Mark**

Even as Antioch could claim to be among the most progressive colleges in the country, it nevertheless indulged in that most venerable use of writing assessment: filtration of students deemed linguistically deviant or deficient. Put simply, Antioch did not take on college students unless they proved themselves capable of composing error-free English. Writing was the coin of the curricular realm at Antioch. In this period preceding what John Brereton has identified as the “birth of the modern composition program” at Harvard, writing instruction had not yet been “confined to well-defined courses” (10). At Horace Mann’s Antioch, writing-intensive courses were not the exception but the norm; student development was monitored and managed through writing assessment across the curriculum. Inclusivity at Antioch was bounded and configured by writing assessment, and while the college publicized itself as hospitable to women and students of color (in addition, of course, to the white men who were the typical entrants to elite colleges), it would be a mistake to think of Mann’s experiment as somehow a radical break from his enduring interest in eugenic racial engineering. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, what we witness at Antioch is not the suspension of racial rubrics for screening, sorting, and selecting students on the basis of their presumed evolutionary worth, but the substitution of one racial rubric for another. Inclusion at Antioch doubled as something like the creation of a phrenological meritocracy. And accordingly, not all students who entered Antioch received the same placement, and all students were subjected to regular examination—screened for their continued development and screened out if they failed tests for retention.

In his most pluralistic moments, Mann never abandoned his understanding that, at the collective level, different body types—those of men and women, white bodies and black bodies—represented different underlying capacities, and that “bestowment of special properties

and qualities on any created thing constitutes, of itself, divine ‘Letters of Instruction;’ not only giving us special notice of a particular use, but commanding us to ascertain and to make the appropriate application” (*A Few Thoughts... Woman* 30-1). Nevertheless, Mann believed that whatever an individual’s initial biological inputs, her ultimate racial worth was partly a function of exercise, habit, and cultivation—the developmental progress or regress that would be inherited by future generations. Moreover, as Mann was happy to admit, collective racial differences inhered only at the collective racial level: considerable variation could be found within races, and within the sexes. This intra-group variation meant it was a mistake to judge individuals’ divine “letters of instruction” purely by their phenotypical covers. Writing assessment peered beyond students’ bodily covers, to read the developmental impressions that had been made inside. Written performance at Antioch may have not fully supplanted other ocular systems for inwardly reading students’ minds—racialized readings of the skin, sexualized readings of the somatype—but it could be leveraged to supplement or supersede these cruder surface-readings.

Not for nothing, Mann identified the first demand of the age on colleges as being for them to raise admissions standards, requiring “something more as a prerequisite for admission into college” (*Demands* 22). In her magisterial *Life of Horace Mann by His Wife*, Mary Mann paints a starker picture of this early assessment scene, emphasizing the role played by entrance examination in exposing and rooting out the mentally underdeveloped. “Out of the whole mass of applicants, representing *every stage of human ignorance*, eight were found qualified upon the whole, though with some conditions, to form a freshman-class,” she writes (*Life* 406, emphasis mine; see also Tomlinson 291-2). All was not lost for those who failed the examinations. Further intellectual incubation was needed: “The rest, old and young, married and unmarried, some of them ministers who had given up their parishes to take a college course of study, were obliged to

drop into the preparatory school, simple as were its requisitions” (*Life* 406). That is, presuming these failed applicants were able, in their writing, to meet the standards for admission to this lower course of study, which included the following rudiments of successful English-language performance: legible handwriting, a knowledge of grammar, correct spelling, a capacity for reading intelligibly (qtd. in H. Mann, *Dedication* 134). The perquisite level of written performance for Antioch’s preparatory school was roughly that which would be expected of students upon successfully completing their Grammar and Writing School work—another structural way that the Antioch examinations follow on the heels of the 1845 writing assessments.

Filtered out in this manner, the low mass of unsuccessful Antioch applicants would become the charges of preparatory school instructors who would work to discipline and develop them. That is, at least *some of them* would. Applicants to the school’s preparatory department came in droves—likely enticed by the opportunity to study under the leading educator of the age—and Horace Mann’s private writings make clear that the cut off for preparatory school admission was higher than its rudimentary requirements would suggest. Rejection rates were sharply *raised* out of material necessity. In an April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1854 letter to Austin Craig, Mann tells his friend that Antioch at that time boasted “almost 300” bodies—only 8 of whom were students in the college itself—but that more than three times that number had to be turned away (Horace Mann to Austin Craig, 24 Apr. 1854). “More than a thousand have applied,” Mann wrote, “but could not obtain accommodations (Horace Mann to Austin Craig, 24 Apr. 1854).” There simply was not space to admit them all, so that vast majority had to be sent away. This initial number of admittees to Antioch tracks closely with the number of failed applicants to Antioch College—making it possible that many, even most of the preparatory school’s roll was filled with the ranks

of failed examinees. Mann was in no way unhappy about this outcome and planned to expand his college only gradually. Mann described these prospective students almost like raw, unrefined matter that his college *might* someday deign to process, admitting to Craig, “I should not desire a very large quantity of this new material all at once, we had better have it, & manipulate it by degrees” (Horace Mann to Austin Craig, 24 Apr. 1854).

Mary Mann does little to disguise her low estimation of Antioch’s failed examinees and preparatory school students, nor does she hide her admiration for the teachers taking on the herculean task of culturing them. Of the preparatory school, she assures us, “The teaching, fortunately, was of a high order; the teaching corps invincible in resolution, patient, sympathizing with the universal aspiration, while lamenting the *low stage of intellectual development*” (*Life* 406, emphasis mine). In fact, some members of Antioch’s first class of college students, like Mahalah Jay and Jane Andrews, were enlisted to moonlight as preparatory school instructors, prodding their pupils’ faculties and correcting their theme writings. An ancillary benefit of admitting women to the college, it seems, was that doing so created an opportunity to extract pedagogical labor from this captive college population—a population suited by nature, Horace Mann believed, to motivate mental growth in those precariously positioned between progression and degeneration. Mary Mann cheerily notes that “the professors’ corps, aided by a few intelligent and well-educated young ladies from the East, who went out prepared to take a college course, and before whom stood in amazement men of twice their age as humble pupils, soon evoked some order out of the chaos” (*Life* 406). The Antioch preparatory school course of study was designed expressly to ensure its students “will be fitted for admission to the Freshman Class” of its attached college (qtd. in H. Mann, *Dedication* 134). In theory, should these preparatory school students acquit themselves admirably in this lower

course of study—gauged, in no small part, through improvements in their writing—they would be allowed to vie again for an Antioch college degree, certifying them as a moral and intellectual leader of America’s racial tomorrow.

Few did. Throughout Mann’s time at Antioch, the college issued diplomas to only 40 students in total—9 women and 31 men—despite enrolling over 1500 preparatory students during that same period (Straker 20, 35).<sup>78</sup> Some college students—including Jane Andrews, admitted to Antioch’s freshman undergraduate class—left the school before attaining their degrees. The writing-intensive course of study at Antioch was strenuous; Andrews, who balanced her composition work with work in the preparatory school, succumbed after a year to “overstudy” and what she called “brain fever,” dropping out of Antioch in 1854 (qtd. in N. Green 37). Were we to assume that Mann sought to elevate each preparatory pupil to the rank of college student, we would be forced to conclude that Antioch’s examination scheme was a dismal failure. Mann judged the success of the school by a different standard. While the potential for eugenic human progress might have, in Mann’s estimation, been infinite, the potential for progress in a single generation was not without limits. With proper public education, all students had the opportunity to rise to the level of their mental potential, but natural inequalities at the individual level could not be eradicated by the common school classroom. Common schooling was a divining rod, not a magic wand—and not every person was born with the constitution necessary for success at the college or even preparatory school level. Colleges did their part to keep the engine of racial progress running when they prepared an intellectual and moral elite of “large-minded men” (H. Mann, *Demands* 21), whose labors in after-life would be to govern their more feebly-endowed counterparts, train the “new race” of children, and contribute meaningfully to the collective stock of knowledge.



Accordingly, Antioch seems in this early period to have taken at least as much pride in eliminating its least developed students as in advancing its most gifted—with writing assessment placed at the fork of these pathways. Writing assessment at Antioch served a formative and eliminative function, exposing students' minds and ejecting their bodies with equal vigor. In this latter regard, examinations provided a durable accountability instrument, ensuring that all students reached required developmental benchmarks, and providing a concrete basis for expelling those who failed to do so. "The training is so thorough here," Mary Mann bragged,

that no lesson is allowed to slip. Every lesson must be made up, if omitted even from illness, and this ensures a thoroughness that is unexampled. The natural result of delinquency is to be put back in the course, for rigid examinations are made at the end of every term, and those who cannot be held up to the mark go home to escape the disgrace. This winnowing has elevated the character of the School very much. (qtd. in Straker 25-26)

The character of the college, it seems, is only as good as the quality of the writers it supports and certifies. Horace Mann himself elevated this eliminative ethos to the level of aphorism. The preparatory school's Professor of Music, L. G. Fessenden, recalls having greeted President Mann one day, while the latter was fast at work gardening. Mann told him, "I believe in cleaning out the weeds, root and branch, and giving the flowers a chance to grow, whether in the garden or in the class-room" (qtd. in Hubbell 67).

Antioch's rigorous assessment ecology offered no shortage of opportunities for this winnowing. In some courses, like C. S. Pennell's Freshman Latin, the end of course examination involved a series of questions to which students responded (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 27 Nov. 1854). Students in Doherty's Rhetoric and Belles Lettres course were also asked to complete a timed, multiple question examination, but this timed test was not all they needed in order for students to successfully complete their courses. In excess of this requirement, a theme paper was expected of each student, to be appraised by the entire Antioch faculty. In an 1854

letter to her sister, Shepard details the harrowing experience of being held up to the mark during her first semester at Antioch:

I have to carry in an[d] dread my last essay, to-day—the one which is subject to the inspection of the whole Faculty. It is a most miserable thing. I can't bear the thought of their reading it. ... You know we have to be examined in each study at the close of every term, and these examination papers are kept with the other college documents—a consideration which is extremely pleasant while you are ... trying to finish the answers in an hour, (which is the time allowed for each) and producing such elegant specimens of chirography. (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 27 Nov. 1854)

All of these end-of-course writings are added to their authors' institutional files—a prospect Shepard sarcastically singles out as “extremely pleasant,” due seemingly to the very documentary properties of writing Mann had celebrated nearly a decade earlier in his “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article. Writing was photographically permanent, interpreted by expert auditors as a mental profile (or daguerreotype) that revealed the writer's innermost attainments. The documentary body for each Antioch student, housed and maintained alongside “the other college documents,” grew each semester, tracking and testifying to inner improvement in a way Mann believed only writing could.

### **Phrenological Passing and Its Discontents**

We have already observed, in preceding sections, how writing assessment helped structure institutional inclusion at Antioch, setting the conditions for entrance, placement, and retention. Importantly for our purposes, the standards configured by written examination did more than screen out students found to be unacceptably low in their intellectual development; they also provided a certification system for vouchsafing the evolutionary caliber of applicants who, on the basis of sex or skin color, would have otherwise been excluded from access to the same higher education opportunities granted to white men. Screened in these ways, Antioch's

students find themselves in a state Sara Ahmed thinks of as “conditional hospitality”—a precarious state of institutional belonging, where “you are welcomed on condition that you give something back” (43). This asymmetric power relation is one that students *socially* enter in order to *materially* enter Antioch, yet hospitality is not conditional in the same way for all students. We deepen our understanding of the role played by writing assessment in authorizing racial and sexual co-education when we consider a handful of instances where Antioch’s rubric of inclusion was put to the test. The archival fragments left behind from Antioch’s first decade record a pattern of controversies around the inclusion of black students in Mann’s race-writing assessment ecology. Black students at Antioch inhabited a state of intensified conditional hospitality. Repeatedly, institutional stakeholders—parents of Antioch students, prospective donors, board members—came into conflict with Mann and the phrenological assessment-rhetoric of inclusion he considered to be essential to Antioch’s mission and identity.

At Antioch, we find an antebellum example of how “[p]eople of color are welcomed *on condition* they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by ‘being’ diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity” (Ahmed 43). For Antioch’s black student population, inclusion seems to have been underwritten by a compounding of these conditions. Within the antebellum assessment ecology at Antioch, and its phrenological matrix of assumptions about human worth and development, a color-blind standard did not mean a race-blind standard. It only meant that the “organizational culture” at Antioch racialized testing along a different axis, provisionally privileging (eugenic) *intra*-racial over (anti-black) *inter*-racial modes of comparison—by no means dispensing with color-sensitivity and color-prejudice. What’s more, this choice of racial standard was not a rhetorically disinterested one. Tolerance, Mann believed, was a sign of high-minded racial development; intolerance and bigotry, of racial

degeneracy. Reopening these cases of controversy over inclusion—reconstructed from accounts preserved in newspaper articles, speeches, letters, and Mary Mann’s published account of this period—we encounter a new rhetorical use for writing assessment, piloted at Antioch. In defining who is included (who is, in Burke’s terms, *entitled* to belong), writing assessments aid institutions in defining themselves as well—entitling themselves to deeper moral qualities that “inclusivity” indexes.<sup>79</sup> In endorsing and enforcing an ostensibly “color-blind” phrenological meritocracy, where the second skin of the page certified students’ inner racial characters, Mann and his team of “anti-emulation men” were tacitly advancing a claim about their *own* racial characters.

To examine how acts of ostensible racial inclusion become sites for rhetorically performing and contesting institutional identity, let us consult Mary Mann’s vexed account of the regime of inclusivity in place at Antioch during its first decade. Striking a note halfway between self-congratulatory and self-pitying, Mary informs us that the presence of black students at Antioch caused no shortage of headaches, her words laced with a palpable lack of enthusiasm for the inconveniences invited by integration:

There is no doubt that Mr. Mann’s principle and resolution in regard to refusing admittance to no one on account of their color was a temporary disadvantage to the college, and alienated many who would otherwise have contributed to its support. He would have been very glad if such applications had not been made until pecuniary difficulties were past; but he would never for a moment listen to the refusal of such applicants, *if suitably prepared to enter*. (*Life* 442)

As Mary Mann put it elsewhere, Horace was willing to abandon “local interests for the Institution, rather than do injustice” (Mary Mann to Henry W. Bellows, 1862?). Importantly, suitability to enter was, by Horace’s design, a function of written language. Some objected to this rubric for entrance, defining *suitability* along lines of pigment, not performance—and this disagreement over developmental fitness for higher education at Antioch became a proving

ground for Horace's system of examination-based inward reading, closely watched and commented on by local and national audiences.

In a May 12, 1858 speech before the New York Anti-Slavery Society, republished in William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*, the abolitionist Wendell Phillips spoke of Mann's writing-based rubric for inclusion as evidencing the Antioch President's exemplary moral merits. Finding his college in serious financial debt, Mann had recently been offered a donation sizeable enough to render the college solvent again, but "only on the condition that he should shut the door in the face of a colored girl, *fitted to enter*; and he said, 'Away, you and your six thousand dollars also—*open that door*!'" (87, emphasis mine). Pointedly, the "girl" in question is no mere applicant—her institutional fitness has been certified, her inward character examined and approved. The door is opened to her, and opened too, perhaps, to more readily kick out the degenerate would-be donor who ransoms Antioch's financial future for the price of its moral mission.<sup>80</sup> Wendell cheers that "Antioch College has a professorship of Moral Philosophy, I doubt not; but ... [b]y that one act, he [Mann] founded and endowed a professorship of moral philosophy for the minority of Antioch better than any mere wealth could have furnished." Wendell, as it happens, need not have credited Mann with this figurative professorship at Antioch: he already served as Antioch's actual Professor of Moral Philosophy, a capacity in which he required his students to compose essays on the ennobling topics of phrenology and human racial progress—another dimension of assessment-rhetoric at Antioch that I treat in the next chapter.

This same episode of financial distress seems to be the focus of an anonymously authored note in the September 9, 1857 edition of the *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, ridiculing Mann and his college for its financial difficulties. The anonymous author holds up

Antioch as an example of the financial ruin that will befall the country itself, if full equality is extended to the United States' black population, reading

Antioch College, Ohio, of which Horace Mann is President, and where white and black students *mingle indiscriminately together*, has been assigned to a New York bank to save it from sale at auction. Even in Ohio *amalgamation* does not pay. What a humbug the idea of negro equality is! Our black republican friends will find soon that it will pay no better, in the long run, as a political speculation, than it has in this case as a college investment. ("Antioch College, Ohio..." [Untitled], n.p., emphasis mine)

Observe in this note how all references to "fitness" and "suitability" have fallen away. Skin, not the second skin of the page, is the test of humanity favored by the note's anonymous author. And for this writer—as for Wendell and Mary Mann—the decision to include or exclude non-white bodies in the (presumptively white) institutional space of Antioch College is a rhetorically significant act, speaking volumes about the inner qualities of Mann (and perhaps also his institution).

Horace Mann himself publicly mocked those who took the bodily surface to determine whether non-white bodies could be counted as human. During Mann's time at Antioch, he delivered a speech on "Liberty," which saw republication in the *Christian Inquirer* after Mann's death. In it, he heaped scorn on pro-slavery strands of race science, flowing from "a school of self-styled philosophers ... who would foist in a new *standard* of manhood. They would determine whether a man is a man or is no man, by *examining* his body and leaving out his soul" ("Liberty [Part 1]" 1, emphasis mine). While bodily differences were the visible signs of different histories, it was important not to rely on these bodily distinctions as our exclusive means of examining human worth. This was the fallacy indulged in by the pro-slavery race scientist: "Our [self-styled] philosopher has *tests*.... He *examines* the man's hair and finds it a little too kinky; — the hair being every thing, but the brain under it, nothing. The nose is too

bulbous and tubular. The lips are not enough like the slip in a poor's-box. ... That is the way he decides upon a man's understanding" (1, emphasis mine).

Lest we confuse Mann's criticism here for a claim that there are no meaningful racial distinctions written in the body, he is at pains to instruct his audience in developing a different, more discriminating racial taste, refined enough to detect what Mann quite literally considers "God's *criterion*" for human assessment ("Liberty [Part 1]" 2, emphasis mine). To assess "personal dignity and physical power," look no further than to bodily debility and disability—to "majestic development of form, in perfectness of limb and sense." For intellectual worth, "God's criterion" can be found in the ability to understand the natural constitution of the world and can be measured in the intellect's "power to enlighten, enlarge and exalt other men." Neither white nor might made right, and neither made one an ideal specimen of the human race. Mann conveys this point with a phrenological dig at the mental capacity of hereditary elites, favorably referencing the craniometric work of race scientist Samuel George Morton. Morton's best-selling 1839 *Crania Americana*—to which George Combe contributed a lengthy, bookending essay—had made the case for innate Caucasian mental supremacy by measuring skulls believed to be representative examples from different racial groups.

Mann took the assumptions of this celebrated work in American race science as a starting place for derogating the hereditary ruling class: "Could the celebrated Doct. Morton find the cubic contents of the foreheads of all who have inherited greatness, I think it would be proved that of all the kinds of business ever transacted in this world, the might business of government has been conducted on the smallest capital of brains. Hereditary great men have been intellectual runts" ("Liberty [Part 1]" 2). Even as Mann resists some bodily criteria as measurements of humanity, he relies on and reinforces others—namely, those most closely implicated in the

*phrenological* race science that provided the foundation for his own theory of human progress. For Mann, the true test of humanity was not skin color or hair texture, or nose or lip shape, but instead able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. (And, to be sure, he would have preferred the craniometric test of head shape and size, which was a rubric for humanity that took the bodily shape for the shape of the mind.) Those less worthy—less fully human—are physically possessed of less “nobleness of stature” and mentally have “less talent, less sagacity, less inventive and didactic power.” To boot, we honor “God’s criterion in regard to morality” when we censure the moral idiots (notably, despots and *slavers*) who “have committed the grandest of all crimes—they have degraded the human race.”

Mann believed that intolerance was both a sign and source of racial decline, declaring on the floor of the United States House of Representatives that Southern whites were intellectually inferior to Northern whites, due to the reliance of the former on slavery: “If the south had not had slaves to do their work for them, they would have become ingenious and inventive like the north, and would have enlisted the vast forces of nature in their service” (*Slavery* 130). Mann may have thought segregation developmentally beneficial to non-white peoples, but he considered outright racial bigotry and intolerance a sign of moral underdevelopment and racial inferiority. In his inaugural address as Antioch’s President, Mann enshrined tolerance and inclusivity as indispensable signs of civilization. He cited a rejection of “caste”-thinking as one of the only “infallible tests of human character” (*Dedication* 92), and named an “animosity of race” (93) as indicative of failing this *other* test of humanity: “Among whatever people the law of caste prevails, or the fact of caste without the law; that people has no right to call itself civilized or Christian” (92). The way we racially assess others, for Mann, is a way we can—ourselves—be assessed as racial beings. For him, the question is not whether to assess racial worth, but how to



ethically and effectively do so. This question—with its self-reflexive, self-regarding implications—is one that Mann enlisted writing assessment to help answer.

The most notable controversies over inclusion at Antioch bubbled up, Mary Mann tells us, in response to “the presence of two young ladies of talent and refinement, who were slightly tinged in complexion” (*Life* 443). The two “young ladies” in question (unnamed by Mary) appear to have been Virginia and Fanny Hunster—sisters from a prominent African American family, whose mother was a local educator for black students in the area (see *Catalogue of Antioch College...1857-8*; “Y. S. Biography, Black Hunster,” *Antiochiana*).<sup>81</sup> Antioch’s preparatory school entrance requirements were, in large part, demonstrations that candidates had mastery of the rudiments of composition, like proper spelling, a knowledge of grammar, and handwriting clear enough to be read by those tasked with marking theme papers. The Hunsters were examined, and their written performance was not found wanting. Phrenologically passing the standard for placement, the aforementioned young ladies were granted entrance-tickets to be seated in Antioch’s preparatory classes. Two white students left Antioch as a result of their parents’ objections to this color-blind assessment system. “One [instance] was of a young man from Delaware,” reports Mary Mann, “whose father professed to be opposed to slavery; but, when he learned from his son that he was in the same classes with these young ladies, he ordered him to leave the institution at once” (*Life* 443).

The white youth had a change of heart when he became acquainted with the meritocratic basis by which they had earned their place at Antioch; he “discovered the *scholarship and standing* of these classmates were far above his own, and that they were highly regarded, and treated with as much respect as others: and he would fain have disobeyed the parental injunction” (M. Mann, *Life* 443, emphasis mine). The young man’s father was having none of

this; anti-slavery was one thing—racial co-education was quite another. Equal freedom from slavery did not racial equality make. And the co-educational nature of Antioch, with the close social intercourse between men and women that its writing assessments encouraged, led some to quake in fear of imminent sexual intercourse between the races.<sup>82</sup> Operating within this matrix of assumptions, what did the young man’s father care if these young ladies of color could write? Their divinely-written racial worth was a book he read by their pigmental covers. Perhaps consumed with this other, institutional composition-rhetoric—a panicked resistance to sexual mixing and racial dilatation—the young man’s father “peremptorily repeated” his command, and the youth vacated Antioch “with great but unavailing regret” (443).

Even more remarkably, these same two young women were the subject of a second dispute over race and entrance examination that reached the highest levels of institutional power at Antioch. In 1857, President Mann was forced to defend his (written) test of humanity against the objections of Antioch’s (then) President of the Board of Trustees, Aaron Harlan. In her account of the incident, Mary Mann declines to identify Harlan by name. Instead, we learn from her about an anonymous “wealthy gentleman” in Yellow Springs (*Life* 443)—an influential fixture of the community, who had presided over the college’s Board since its first year of operation. Initially, “Mr. Harlan’s daughter had been rejected for want of due preparation,” and took a year or two to ready herself for entrance to Antioch’s preparatory school (Mary Mann to Henry W. Bellows, 1862?). By that time, the Hunsters had already been attending Antioch—having passed when Harlan’s daughter failed. “When his own daughter was of suitable age, and qualified to enter the preparatory school,” Harlan took the unprecedented step of demanding that the examination-guaranteed right of entry be stripped from the two young women of color with whom his daughter would find herself in school (M. Mann, *Life* 443). After Harlan personally

“ordered the steward not to renew the entrance-tickets of those young ladies of color,” Antioch found itself in a state of ethical fracture, with two different racial codes of entrance coming into explicit conflict. The matter was referred by the steward to Horace and the Teaching Committee at Antioch, who cast their weight behind the entrance examination over Harlan’s color prejudice as a standard for deciding suitability for the preparatory school. Horace “would not consent to such injustice” (Mary Mann to Henry W. Bellows, 1862?). Enraged by the Teaching Committee’s choice of racial standard, Harlan “threw up his office and all interest in the institution” (M. Mann, *Life* 443).

In his September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1857 resignation letter to Mann, Harlan states his position almost breathlessly—his prose uninterrupted by punctuation, his racial grievances ballooning into a total renunciation of Antioch: “Being advised that Black and Mulatto and Colored Students are to be admitted into the College Clases [sic] contrary to my remonstrance . . . I hereby resign my place on the Com.[mittee] and shall as far as in my power hold myself absolved from all its contracts and engagements and in future have nothing to do with its business” (Typescript, *Antiochiana*).<sup>83</sup> Note how the target of Harlan’s ire, initially two young women of color, has dilated to become entire racial groups. Unleashed by Harlan’s pen, categories of racial deviance proliferated and expanded (“Black *and* Mulatto *and* Colored Students”)—though Harlan imagined that, by propagating nonwhite forms of life on the page, he might in his final official gesture at Antioch, expose and regain mastery over the dark bodies he feared would pollute and overtake the campus. With no ability to enact his own form of racial quality control over the campus, a disgusted Harlan thus excused himself from the business of the college—his standard for humanity, felled by those embodied in Mann’s examination.

Yet it is easy to exaggerate the ways that Harlan's test for entrance was incompatible with Mann's more meritocratic system of inward reading. On one level, the gulf dividing these competing assessment-rhetorics might appear to us unbridgeable, and with good cause: Harlan's criterion for composing the Antioch student body was explicitly color-based, while Mann's was intentionally color-blind. In the face of this stark separation at the level of assessment methodology, it is all too easy to overlook how Harlan's and Mann's tests for humanity converge on a shared aim and ideal. Methodological differences aside, Harlan and Mann are each pursuing the aim of racial progress, and they are doing so by means of racial curation—screening out those assessed to be unfit for higher education. Fairer still, we might think of the aim shared by Harlan and Mann as that of staving off racial degeneration—Harlan, by preventing inter-racial inter-mingling at Antioch; Mann, by rooting out those revealed by inward reading as unfit for higher education. Mann made no qualms about ejecting those whom he considered contaminants in the Antioch student body, slowing down collective mental culture or jeopardizing the college's moral hygiene. The college existed to secure racial betterment for the New American Race—and how could it accomplish these goals, if imbecility was allowed to take root at the college and spread? By his own account, Mann relished the opportunity to clear out the weeds at Antioch.

In his racist animosity toward the Hunsters, Harlan would have failed Mann's test of human civilization and Christianity. By a kind of self-regarding logic, Mann himself passed this test of humanity by judging the Hunsters to have phrenologically passed theirs. And while Mann likely regarded Harlan's fetish for white skin as contemptable, both men are—in their way—reliant for their visions of progress on a white American ideal. True, Mann did not—like Harlan—imagine progressive racial worth as exclusive to white bodies, or evenly distributed

among them. But for all these caveats, Mann understood progress to be a white property. The developmental high-water mark for humanity was one he believed to have been set by white civilizational order—an order that recapitulated itself in that language of progress, *English*. To read and write English was, as Mann understood it, to participate in and be cultured by the habits of mind proper to racial development. Over generational time, the progressive mental exercise made possible by English-language literacy would yield a new and improved race of American children, biologically enhanced by the educational efforts of their parents. Editing the page was, for him, a way to edit the racial body—edging it closer to Apollos than orang-outans in the great chain of development.

Racial and sexual inclusivity were palatable to Mann because his peculiar phrenological commitments inclined him to regard inclusion as a powerful instrument for collective evolutionary progress. So while Mann breaks with Harlan by refusing to screen students out on the basis of their pigment, he nevertheless is screening them for their compatibility with a white civilizational order—an order he equates with racial progress itself. Mann's putatively color-blind test of humanity is still a racialized test, centering a racialized linguistic standard put in place to promote a particular racial end. We find, in Antioch's antebellum measure of merit, a new kind of biopolitical instrument: Students are judged not by the color of their skins, but the content of the *characters* inscribed in their composition books.

## CHAPTER 6

### Sex, Composition, and Population Control:

#### The Virtues of Theme Criticism at Antioch

*If we look at the history of writing instruction in America, we find that writing teachers have been as much or more interested in who they want their students to be as in what they want their students to write. (Faigley, “Judging” 396)*

Virtue was the imagined lifeblood of Antioch College, Horace Mann’s experimental assessment ecology. Scripting the conduct of Antioch’s student body, virtue could be read in the chaste and cultured exchanges of students in the co-educational classroom. By implication, virtue was considered present whenever the tobacco, alcohol, profanity, and “rowdyism” were absent—each, a race-degenerating vice that Mann was at pains to stamp out (*Report and Resolutions* 10). Virtue could be found in the church-house on Sundays, when Mann—in his dual capacity as Antioch’s President and spiritual guide—delivered sermons on phrenological practical Christianity before a congregated mass of Antioch’s students and faculty. Virtue was believed to fill the lectures and books that students internalized, and to be prompted by the written assignments students were tasked with completing. And, if the college was successful, this moral lifeblood could be found flowing like ink from the pens of Antioch’s student writers, shaping what they wrote—and how. It is in this spirit that, in a March 3, 1858 letter to Austin Craig, Mann details his pride in “the character of our students” and “their freedom from almost all the vices and evil habits which are commonplace in other colleges”—noting that this impressive

moral character is articulated *to* and *through* the “the high, elevated, and often religious tone of their exercises, whether for exhibition or class compositions” (Horace Mann to Austin Craig, 3 Mar. 1858). Virtue was the essential element of pedagogical race-writing at Antioch, and it could be inwardly read not just in the daily conduct of the student body, but in their bodies of writing—perhaps particularly, the large corpus of theme papers they composed.

This institutional prioritization of moral culture is something we can learn about through Mann’s published writings, and through internal documents—like course catalogues—that bear Antioch’s imprint. Historians hoping to learn what this cultivation and assessment of virtue looked like in actual student writings would normally expect to find their efforts frustrated, with actual *student* writings themselves scattered to the proverbial winds—anonymous and forgotten, or else discarded in a dust-bin like so much rubbish. Such is the sad lot of the inner world of the classrooms that populate the past of composition, leaving historians with an evidentiary absence to write around. As Anne Ruggles Gere has it, “To write a history of anything requires data, records that document what occurred in the past, so that an author can construct a narrative of events. . . . The problem is that instruction, especially instruction in writing, remains largely invisible” (“Teaching” 233). If anything, classroom writing *assessment* is rendered doubly invisible, marginalized or erased within the discipline’s historical memory—in part, for want of data. Even in those happy instances where student writings have been preserved, formal appraisals of those writings may not have survived alongside them—assuming these instances of assessment were even recorded in the first place, rather than being conducted orally. Documentary resources for studying classroom assessment-rhetoric in antebellum America are a kind of academic “ephemera,” in the sense of that term discussed by Nan Johnson: “These texts and artifacts are marginalized, fragile, and quickly disappearing” (“History” 17).

For this reason, it is remarkable—if also appropriate, for an institutional culture that prized *inscriptions*, written and mental—that an abnormally large number of Antioch’s student writings have survived from the College’s inaugural Graduating Class of 1857. The archives of Antioch and of Earlham College have, respectively, preserved the student papers of wife and husband Mahalah and Eli Jay. More remarkable still, many of the Jays’ student compositions are accompanied by two different forms of assessment—professor marks and peer criticism letters—each of which helps to concretize and make visible the ways that writing instruction and assessment at Antioch supported the project of inscribing and inspecting the student body’s moral culture. To these documentary resources can be added a third, in the form of the student diary of the Jays’ classmate Ada Shepard, which has been safeguarded in a personal family archive by Shepard’s descendant, Susan D. Abele. Triangulating these artifacts with Mann’s better-known institutional pronouncements provides us a rare opportunity to understand how classroom writing assessment enters the story of postsecondary education as a way to examine *who* students are through *what* they write, as Lester Faigley might put it.

Seizing this opportunity, this chapter adds new elements to Faigley’s formula, showing that writing assessment supplied antebellum Antioch with an ethical machinery for regulating and augmenting virtue in the student body, and for structuring students’ attachments to one another in the classroom. Classroom writing assignments and assessments did so by enacting a “cultural pedagogy” (S. Miller, *Assuming* 4) that taught Antioch’s students how to relate to their own writings and the writings of others—and, by extension, how to relate to themselves and others *through appraisals of writing*. Consider: Each time a student like Mahalah or Eli Jay was prompted to write a theme paper, they entered into an assessment-rhetorical space structured to scrutinize their moral character. Upon setting pen to paper, they were required by instructors to



write on moral topics, encouraged to engage personally and affectively with those topics, and praised for the propriety and virtue of their writing habits. Each time a student meditated on a moral topic meaningfully enough to write on it, durable mental inscriptions were imagined to be made—impressions that shaped and sharpened student sympathies, entering them into a more virtuous sentimental order.

Instructor criticism reinforced for student writers what the Institution saw in the daguerreotype likenesses of their compositions, directing these writers' attention to the virtues on display therein. In the form of written theme criticisms, peer assessments of these essays reinforced these moral judgments, while also positioning student critics as corrective social agents, responsible for rendering judgment on the efforts of their fellow students—and for recommending paths for improvement. Theme criticism at Antioch was, after all, itself a form of classroom composition, every bit as formal as the theme papers being criticized: students penned their written assessments on new sheets of paper, titled and dated these documents, and printed their names neatly near the top of the page, before submitting them to the peer whose work was being appraised. By engaging in this peer assessment work, Antioch's students assumed the position of assessor, and were taught the subtle art of *race-writing*—that is, the assessment-rhetoric of composing progress in the United States.

Recovering the roles played by theme criticism at early Antioch subtly but meaningfully revises the discipline's historical memory of local classroom writing assessment by locating *race-writing* as a new source for the field's founding preoccupation with “‘reformist’ and ‘progressive’ methods to persuade students to enthusiastically write texts that are finally, strangely, corrected” (S. Miller, “Composition” 20). Contrary to mainstream thinking about the history of writing education, the pedagogical obsession over correctness and error in composition

is anything but “mechanical” at its inception; initially, this interest had surprisingly little to do with efficiency culture, economic imperatives, or Puritanical fixations on purity. Such concerns about composition, while not entirely absent, were decidedly secondary to concerns about racial composition. Writing “correctly” at Antioch was merely one mode of a more general concern for writerly virtue, itself imbued with eugenic import and racial stakes within Mann’s experimental assessment ecology.

Qualitatively, propriety and virtue in writing helped to protect students against *moral idiocy*, a particular kind of race degeneracy that Mann bemoaned during his years as Antioch’s President. As will be discussed in the next section, the moral idiot might be an agent possessed of high-levels of mental culture, yet without the requisite moral culture needed to restrain and focus the mind’s energies in ways beneficial to the race. For students who passed Antioch’s entrance examination, error could not be attributed entirely to incapacity. For these admittees, propriety mattered because it testified, in a rudimentary way, to their moral habits, with error evidencing an authorial carelessness—or worse, a lack of interest in improvement. In this regard, substance follows form: The sentiment conveyed in an essay’s content was of consequence because it externalized the sentiments being measured by the writer’s mind, marking and molding it—each virtuous theme paper, a prophylactic measure against moral idiocy. Relatedly, as we will learn later in this chapter, Mann was fearful of the population-level dangers posed by indiscriminate reproductive sex—*indiscriminate*, that is, in both senses of being injudicious and unrestrained.

Co-education at Antioch was, in Mann’s judgment, not only palatable but desirable because it provided a contained and controlled social world where men and women could cultivate sexual morality and restraint. Peer criticism provided an institutionally-sanctioned

contact zone for young men and women at Antioch, preparing each to regulate their sentiments and restrain their sexual passions. When considering peer criticism at Antioch not as a practice ancillary to theme writing but as an assessment-rhetoric in its own right, its eugenic social uses and cultural meanings come into view. In structuring social intercourse between the sexes, writing assessment was configured as a technology of population control—operant in the college classroom and in the preparatory school appended to it.

Historical reexamination of this kind is timely at a moment when rhetoric and composition scholars are pushing for an ethical turn in the discipline, which actively considers the roles played by virtue in the writing classroom and other composition-spaces (see, e.g., Brown; Duffy, “Good” and *Provocations*; Duffy, Gallagher, Holmes). A moment, too, when some writing assessment scholars are investing their energies and hopes in the social justice potential of assessing so-called “non-cognitive” domains of writing, including a composition’s intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects (for instance, its “ethics”), and the labor necessary for generating it—domains believed to open up new ways of valuing students and their writings (see, e.g., Elliot “Theory”; Inoue, *Antiracist*; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, *Writing*). In a more general way, close attention to the ethical character of writing (and writing assessment) arguably helps us cut to the core of what makes writing *matter*—what makes writing “good.”

As Duffy contends, “Writing involves ethical decisions because every time we write ... we propose a relationship with others, our readers. In proposing such relationships, we raise those questions moral philosophers attach to the ethical: What kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life? What does it mean to be a good person?” (“Good” 229-30). Something similar is true for writing assessment, as I have argued elsewhere (Hammond, “Definitive”). Any approach to assessing writing structures relationships to and through writing,

proposing ways to engage with and around texts. To speak of virtue in writing—or in assessing writing—is to make claims about what morally appropriate relationships require and about what kinds of writers are “good.” The microhistorical case of classroom assessment at Antioch—with its emphasis on virtue as a means of managing racial hygiene—helps us understand how attention to virtue and the ethical character of writing does not, in itself, eradicate the violent potential of assessment. In any assessment ecology that prizes virtue, we should, at a minimum, not just ask *which* values do we teach, but also “*whose* virtues do we teach” (Duffy, “Good” 231, emphasis mine)—and to what imagined end?

These are questions less of assessment method than assessment-rhetoric—and these are questions I ask of the archival artifacts I engage with in the sections of this chapter to follow. In the first of these, I recover the structuring role of virtue in Mann’s race-writing scheme, as well as Mann’s concern over race-degenerating “moral idiocy,” as he called it. Then, I consider instructor criticism at Antioch, before proceeding to peer criticism—contextualizing these appraisals of student writing alongside the thematic content of the assignments students were completing, as well as the texts, theories, and anxieties that lent local depth to the seemingly superficial comments that critics made. Following these re-examinations of how faculty and students assessed theme papers, I turn to a closer consideration of Mann’s beliefs about over-population and examine how these beliefs framed co-education and peer criticism at Antioch—with writing assessment helping to structure social intercourse between men and women at the college, participating in Mann’s race-writing agenda. Taken together, these scenes of assessment from Antioch’s first decade aid us in understanding that the rhetorical meanings of *virtue* are contingent on a deeper moral aim that gave them form and force. For Mann and the phrenological institution he presided over, this imagined aim was composing progress—race-

writing the United States into a eugenic paradise, freed from mental and moral idiocy, and from disease and disability. Remembering this history is one way for us to avoid re-composing an assessment agenda of this kind, where examining virtue doubles as a way to expose, eradicate, or modify those deemed unfit for the utopia we are tinkering towards.

### **Variations on a Disciplinary Theme: The Hygienic Writer and the Moral Idiot**

Though fundamentally a process of writing assessment, 19<sup>th</sup>-century theme criticism has gone underdiscussed in writing assessment historiography, with our narratives for assessment propelled by talk of large-scale, mass market, or standardized testing instruments; by discussion of developments in reliability, validity, and psychometric theories; or by formal entrance, exit, or placement examinations. Alongside school textbooks, theme writing assignments and practices have enjoyed an understandably central role in our memory of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writing education (see, e.g., Berlin; Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*; Zenger), yet we frequently encounter references to theme marking, grading, or critiquing only in passing.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps when compared with a high-profile test like the SAT or a landmark textbook like Barrett Wendell's *English Composition*, these often local, informal, low stakes acts of assessment have struck historians as too anonymous, unsystematic, or mundane to sustain detailed analysis. Drawing on insights from Charles Paine and Susan Miller, my microhistorical engagement with assessment at Antioch attempts one model for how we might more meaningfully engage even with the most surface-level theme criticisms: Considering them not as mere appendages to the body of writing instruction, but instead as *assessment-rhetorical* texts—inadvertent time capsules of sorts, preserving particular ways that writing, students, and progress were appraised relative to one another.

Theme composition was a staple of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century postsecondary writing education in the United States, with students in Grammar and Rhetoric courses required to complete regular written exercises on what Robert Connors remembers as “abstract topics” (*Composition-Rhetoric* 140; see also Kitzhaber; Wozniak). Edward Tyrrel Channing, for instance, often assigned themes targeting social commentary, aesthetic taste and refinement, and discriminating judgments about position and propriety—cultivating students’ class sensibilities as they occupied the subject position of Harvard Writer (see also Paine). A student enrolled in one of Channing’s courses between 1834 and 1837 might, depending on the week, be asked to “[e]xplain the phrases, a man of business, a man of pleasure, a man of the world” (qtd. in Cameron 23), to expound “[t]he ways in which a man’s style may be said to offend against simplicity” (25), or else answer the question, “Do we call a man or his achievements great, in reference to ourselves, or to others, or from some absolute sense of power?” (27, emphasis in original). Theme composition exercises like these, completed at intervals within a course, supplied students with opportunities to put into practice principles of written composition they had encountered in the lectures their instructors delivered—and, at least in theory, provided instructors an instrument for formatively guiding the developing writers in their charge.

In Mann’s institutional agenda, education at Antioch was structured to support moral composition—*of* and *by* students—because morality was imagined to be a race-writing property, necessary for maintaining racial health and for securing racial progress. Kyla Schuller reminds us that Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and other adherents of evolutionary “impression theory”—what I have been discussing as Mann’s *inscription* theory of race-writing—considered moral capacity and sentiment to be powerful signs of racial development, and also powerful agents of racial change. It was believed by them that “[a]mong the most advanced species...an emotional

response to a physical sensation—what others called sentiment—motivates the body’s movement and subsequent development,” such that “morality and interior sentiment guide the growth of the most advanced animals,” Schuller writes (48). Within Antioch’s assessment ecology, cultivation of virtuous sentiment in the student body was intended to fit graduating students with moral habits that would facilitate their continued development after college—and that, in doing so, would prevent their moral and mental degeneration.

As a shorthand, we could name the virtuous student intended to emerge from Antioch the *hygienic writer*—that is, a subject whose attention to textual “health” and quality reproduced itself in racial health and quality. In choosing this name, I take inspiration from Paine’s work on the “resistant writer,” a connection discussed later in this section. As hygienic writers, each class of graduates from Antioch was certified by Mann not just for their mental but also their moral character; students from this class were presumed to have habits inimical to a racially destructive force that Mann called “moral idiocy,” which channeled the mind and body to population-damaging ends. To reckon with the assessment-rhetoric at work in Antioch’s classroom writing assessment regime, we must first understand how the writing classroom was implicated in manufacturing “hygienic” moral agents, and how moral “idiocy” was believed to endanger the world. This section engages these themes, and the next discusses the *themes* assigned to students across the Antioch curriculum.

First, the composition of the hygienic writer. One way to understand the role played by the writing classroom in this race-writing agenda is to bring instruction at Antioch into conversation with insights from Susan Miller’s *Assuming the Positions* and Paine’s *Resistant Writer*, each of which explores the relationship of writing and cultural (re)production to the (re)invention of the writerly subject. In her historical examination of “ordinary” or

“commonplace” composition—that is the writing of “diaries, of letters, ... and other seemingly ephemeral jotting”—Miller contends that the process of writing itself aids in *composing* the writer as a subject, reproducing culture in and through the writer by training the writer to *assume* a cultural position (*Assuming* 1). Commonplace writing habituates writers to inhabit culturally “common” modes of expression and address. Describing this “productivity of the commonplace and its textual regulation of identity,” Miller identifies the act of “ordinary writing” with “ongoing constitutive teachings, a continuous process of cultural pedagogy. Society’s ‘workings’ become visible in the purposes, imagined audiences, content, and outcomes of the texts that specific cultures make possible, even those already canonized” (4).

The writerly position we assume—or, as Asao Inoue might put it, the writerly *habitus* we inhabit (see *Antiracist*)—structures our codes of expression and shapes how we can relate to one other through writing. In doing so, it shapes us: *What* we write makes us *who* we are, positioning us within a particular cultural ecology. Put differently, “the act of writing itself constitutes shifting interventions in human possibilities” (S. Miller, *Assuming* 5), which writers define themselves through and against. As I will argue, classroom theme assessment, while more formally “academic” and institutional than the kinds of writing Susan Miller discusses, is nonetheless an ordinary, “seemingly ephemeral” site where students assume a writerly position important to Antioch’s phrenological culture: that of the critic of writerly hygiene and virtue, a subject position that trains the peer assessor to inwardly read writing, and to engage in race-writing through criticism.

For his part, Paine discusses 19<sup>th</sup>-century rhetorical education at Harvard—contemporaneous with, but extending past, the period discussed in this chapter—as providing students a kind of rhetorical “inoculation,” preparing them to fight off cultural contamination and



corruption. Pass through rhetorical education at Harvard, and you emerge as a “resistant” writer, or so the institutional logic goes. In Paine’s account, at least two of Harvard’s Boylston Chairs of Rhetoric and Oratory—Adams Sherman Hill and Edward Tyrrel Channing (brother of William Ellery Channing, one of Horace Mann’s best and oldest friends)—“wanted the study of writing to endow the student with certain powers of resistance against an infectious and seemingly omnipresent mass culture” (xiii). The assumptions underlying this kind of elite rhetorical training included a fear and contempt for low(er) “popular” culture, which threatened to infect the minds of Harvard’s impressionable young men, thereby reproducing itself in the habits of the United States’ future ruling class. As Paine argues, though, these assumptions also included an understanding that human nature was in some fundamental ways distinct from the culture that surrounds it. Describing Hill’s pedagogical mission, Paine tells us,

the writing teacher must enable students to uncover what really is their universal, human nature, their “real selves.” The writing teacher helps students “wash off,” we might say, popular culture, which covers the citizenry—and thus college students—like a patina. Then, by endowing students with a “hardy English,” a “moral stamina,” teachers provide students with the resistance to subsequent assaults on their true selves. (146)

Hill understood the writing classroom “as a kind of proctor of student health—linguistic health, which is closely related, for Hill, to the moral health of the individual and society” (129). In showing how writing education preserves students against degradation from without, Paine’s work complements Miller’s insights about how the act of writing habituates writers to perform and occupy a “graphic identity” (*Assuming* 9)—a subject position, mediated through writing. Taken together, these scholars help us begin to understand how, within Antioch’s assessment ecology, the requirement that students write about *moral* subjects—and do so in ways that signaled virtue—could be imagined as culturally (re)producing those students *as* moral subjects. The act of theme writing and theme criticism would have regulated the “textual” identities of

students through cultural pedagogy, teaching them how to relate to their own writings, and the writings of others; it would have also “inoculated” students against “low” cultural corruption and degradation by arming them with higher habits of expression and of mind.

Understood within the context of Mann’s phrenological beliefs about race-writing, such a textual regulation of the self and of health would have registered physiologically: the act of *writing* defines, composes, and develops *race*. Culture *cultivated* students in the sense of developing their biological substance; writing remade writers from within, developing and improving them in ways that were biologically heritable—a kind of intergenerational racial transfer. To capture this added race-writing dimension to the writing education promised at Antioch, I will call the writerly identity promoted at the college “hygienic” rather than “resistant,” a choice of name inspired by and indebted to Paine’s work, but that calls to mind more readily the kind of eugenic fixation with racial hygiene and physiological upkeep at work in Mann’s experimental assessment ecology.<sup>85</sup> Mann’s theory of racial inscription led him to believe that, in the absence of moral hygiene, bodily hygiene was forfeit. In his final Baccalaureate Address, delivered just weeks before his death in 1859, Mann instructed his graduating class to hold fast to the knowledge that vices enervated the body and mind. Morality maintained or mutilated the racial hygiene, across generational time:

Rum-blasted or tobacco-blasted nerves become non-conductors of volition; and a porous and spongy brain can no more generate mental fire than a feather can beget lightning. Weak parents can no more be blessed with strong children than wrens can hatch eagles ... If a company of one hundred families would set themselves to-day profoundly and devotedly to the work of exemplifying God’s physiological laws, they would, in five generations of continued fidelity to them, govern the world. (“Baccalaureate...1859” 515-6)

God’s physiological laws, within the phrenological assessment-rhetoric animating Mann’s agenda, included mental exercise and moral conduct. Virtuous adherence of this kind was the

secret to racial progress and, Mann adds for good measure, imperial world conquest. Absent this fidelity, a different fate would befall the new race of Americans Mann sought to cultivate. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Mann had a special eugenic reason for promoting moral culture through writing education at Antioch. Composing hygienic writers was necessary, he thought, if humanity was to eradicate the insidious racial threat posed by those who were, to the sight, mentally or physically normal, despite being dangerous moral degenerates.

During his time at Antioch, Mann continued his campaign against physical and intellectual race degeneration, but found himself increasingly tormented by the threat posed by moral degeneracy. No novice at “making up people” (Hacking, “Kinds”), Mann dedicated himself to spreading public awareness of a species of person who, changeling-like, passed unnoticed among the morally normal, even enjoying positions of social prominence—all-the-while fraying America’s social fabric and threatening to unravel its racial health. He called this toxic human kind the “moral idiot,” and spoke at length on the scourge of moral imbecility in a number of speeches he gave during the 1850s, including his inaugural *Dedication Address* as Antioch President. Failure to meaningfully integrate moral training into formal education has led to a world where “the imbeciles, the idiots, in morals, have been far more numerous than those in intellect” (H. Mann *Dedication* 106). The figure of the dissolute Roué, so hated by Mann (see Chapter 3), was one figure of moral idiocy: A body and mind ravaged by moral incontinence, and polluting the city streets with its bad example. What’s more, history’s most infamous scoundrels were moral idiots, Mann proclaimed with a simianizing flourish: “When Benedict Arnold betrayed his country because he wanted money to minister to his vices, he was on no higher an intellectual level than the *monkey* who excoriates his throat with scalding water, because he is thirsty” (107, emphasis mine).

While moral idiots could be found in every stratum of society, Mann seems to have preoccupied himself with fears concerning the spread of moral imbecility into the upper echelons of national power. Those ensconced in positions of social and political prominence were responsible for educating the rest of society through their example. When moral imbecility spread to these scions, they spread it through the rest of the population. Bad governance of this kind accelerated the pace of dysgenic decline, setting the race back centuries in developmental time. “For magnitude, for tenacious vitality, there are no crimes like national crimes,” Mann warned: “Individuals can debase individuals, but governments can brutalize a race. A wicked government makes agony epidemic in space and chronic in duration. It strikes a blow that stuns humanity for ages” (*Dedication* 22). Over the course of generations, mal-education physically alters the brain, shrinking it and making us more bestial—a fact with which, Mann tells us, Great Britain was painfully learning: “The British government lowered the forehead of the Irish Catholic peasantry two inches, by making it an offence punishable with fine, imprisonment, and with a traitor’s ignominious death, to be the teacher of children in school; and by the cruel administration of her cruel laws, she transposed their brain from the intellectual *fore*-head to the animal *hind*-head” (22-3, emphasis in original). Moral imbecility was a cultural disease, the effects of which cascaded beyond those afflicted—and in the absence of expert intervention, the disease and its effects were sure to spread. Against this cultural disease, hygienic writing was posed as a partial cure.

### **A “Duty to Press Forward”: Composing Morality**

To the extent that mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century theme compositions are discussed by historians of writing education, the focus of this discussion has been the *fact* that theme writing and theme

criticism occurred—and that they were the source of tremendous investments in time and labor. Beyond this, little is known about the local meanings of particular theme topics, much less of the particular ways in which theme papers were assessed. To attend to the moral mission of classroom writing instruction in the antebellum United States—vexed with violent assumptions about race, ability, and progress—is to upend existing understandings of the cultural meanings and social stakes of composition during a period regarded by historians as formative for the discipline. The microhistorical case of classroom assessment at Antioch helps us to understand that composition’s cultures of correction were powered by complex local assessment-rhetorics—and that theme topics as well as theme criticisms were charged with local moral meaning.<sup>86</sup> To understand the hygienic importance ascribed to writing assignments at Antioch, it is necessary for us to understand that, to a significant degree, Mann pinned his hopes for moral betterment at Antioch to the compositions his students penned each term.

Consult existing historiography on theme writing and assessment during this period, and the chances are good you will learn that this work was soul-crushing mechanical drudgery, meant to remake students into something more bureaucratic than aristocratic. “The culture was calling for a new sort of educated man [sic], and the sophomore- and freshman-level writing courses—with their emphasis on forms, on error-free writing, and on the ability to follow directions—were born in response to the call,” Connors tells us (*Composition-Rhetoric* 223; see also Kitzhaber). The increasing focus on error identification has often, in histories circulated within the discipline, been rationalized as an undesirable (if understandable) response to market exigencies and rapid industrialization—exoteric encroachments on the composition classroom, gaining in cultural momentum and social force after the Civil War’s end (see, e.g., Connors,

*Composition-Rhetoric*; Crowley, *Composition*; Kitzhaber; S. Miller, *Textual*). Closer archival attention to assessment at Antioch during this period reveals the inadequacy of this account.

I am not the first to find that the field's dominant narrative for 19<sup>th</sup>-century classroom composition—positioning, as it does, “the professors and administrators of the modern university” as “willing participants in the growing predominance of managerial capitalism” (Paine 114)—unhelpfully tidies away the messiness and heterogeneity of the composition classroom. In Paine's words, “this neat cause-and-effect relationship between the dominant business world and the new university assumes a pan-societal ideology that is far too isomorphic to be of much help. Such a paradigm does violence to the subtleties of cultural change and allows historians to pass over the subtleties of composition theory and the culture within which it was formed” (114-5). Historiographic streamlining of this kind not only does violence to composition theory, it also does violence to chronology. Error-fixation in no way enters the story of writing education as an outgrowth of factory-style standardization and efficiency imperatives. Like the promise of progress, *error* has been with the discipline always, even though it has been constructed in different ways at different times (Santa; see also Anson; Matarese and Anson; Paine). If anything, late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century standardization culture was able to take root in the writing classroom due, in part, to its compatibility with composition's existing cultures of correction. As we will see below, this cultural imperative was in evidence in Antioch's antebellum college writing classroom long before the post-bellum industrial boom, with its new and expanding mass of students to assess.

If the moral mission of writing education is always somehow the animating subtext of classroom composition, the microhistorical case of theme assessment at Antioch is a particularly useful one. At that Yellow Springs institution, writing education's moral subtext was made overt

*text.* After their successful performances on Antioch's 1853 entrance examinations, the Jays found themselves completing weekly writing assignments, nearly a hundred of which have survived (along with over 30 peer criticisms), documenting the diverse array of composition tasks undertaken by Antioch's students on their way to being certified as hygienic writers. The Jays penned papers on historical trends, events, and characters; they wrote compositions on scientific discoveries and the natural world, on rhetorical best practices, and on the intellectual value of the classical Greek and Latin tongues; they completed written exercises in logic; they authored commentaries on theodicy and on American government. For their senior year courses led by Horace Mann himself, the Jays even composed on the themes of human progress and phrenology. Across the curriculum, this thematic writing encouraged students to ruminate on, internalize, and externalize the "good sense" of improvement, development, and adherence to God's laws—expressing this good sense until it became the common sense of those attending the college.

Kathleen A. Welsch has begun the important work of examining theme writing at Antioch, triangulating Mahalah's (often expository) writings with her antebellum "historical, social, and cultural influences" ("Thinking" 16), as well as the "academic influences and the rules of rhetoric" sketched in Antioch's textbooks (17; see also L. Buchanan; Welsch, *Nineteenth-Century*). Forging these connections, Welsch reminds us that "Mahala[h] no more wrote in an academic vacuum than students do today.... Her essays are an opportunity for us to consider what it was like to think like *that*—a conscientious and dutiful, female student writing compositions at a small, liberal, midwestern college in the 1850s" ("Thinking" 16, emphasis mine). Continuing this work into the domain of assessment-rhetoric, we can consider how "the rigorous mental and moral discipline" provided in Antioch's writing classrooms (Welsch

“Thinking” 16) was articulated to and through appraisals of student writing. Rather than focusing our attention on what it was like to *think* like that, I explore what it meant to *assess* like that—as improvement-oriented students participating in an experimental assessment ecology shaped by phrenological assumptions about bodily development and worth.

We gain a clearer sense for how student writing at Antioch related to moral hygiene when we inspect the themes Mahalah and Eli composed for scrutiny by Horace Mann himself. According to Henry Clay Badger—a member of Antioch’s first graduating class, its third Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1858-1862), and as of 1859, Ada Shepard’s husband—Horace Mann’s “mode of teaching was suggestive and stimulating.... It was his wont to hear us recite a few hours each week, assigning special lessons to special pupils, giving each some question, some theory, some matter-of-fact inquiry, on which each could pursue investigations at leisure, and prepare a paper to be read before the whole class, and be commented upon by himself” (qtd. in M. Mann, *Life* 452; see also Hubbell 65; Straker 25-6). If the papers left behind by Eli and Mahalah are any indication, Mann departed from the college’s norm by providing only oral criticism, leaving no record of his commentary on the quality—or moral qualities—of his students’ compositions. What they *do* document, however, is the way that theme writing itself enjoined students to assume the position of the progressive phrenological subject—a hygienic writer who has received deep mental inscriptions (or “impressions”) on the virtuous themes of improvement and improvability.

Race-writing was both the content and the consequence of Mann’s theme assignments. An explicit part of the writing curriculum—at least as of students’ senior years, when this work was personally managed by Mann—was internalizing the idea that human progress was under siege by the forces of degeneration, and that phrenologically-minded education was needed to



defend the (white Western) future. Consider, for instance, the following composition completed by Mahalah for Mann's senior-level course on Political Economy, which reads suspiciously like a précis of her professor's race-writing assumptions. It is difficult to imagine Mann being anything less than pleased to find inscribed in Mahalah's mind the following paean for progress, and the civilizational supremacy of the (white) Western world: "we might infer, that man must of necessity be a progressive being. Such is, I think, a favorite idea of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which often finds expression in the form; 'Progress is a law of our nature;' and if we look only at our own nation, and the civilized nations of Modern Europe, we may think we find evidence of the correctness of our inference" (Untitled composition... "Physical"). Mahalah seems to capture Mann's own mixed feelings about the trajectory of human evolution when she asks:

But, as a historical fact, is not *retrogression* a characteristic of our species, as well as progress? Where are the splendid civilizations of Assyria, of Egypt, of Greece, of Rome? Gone! swept from the earth! and the *degenerate descendants* of those once glorious nations scarce know the story of their ancestral greatness. And if the civilization of the present day has in it the elements of permanency more than that of the past, is it to the steam-engine, the electric telegraph, or to the printing press, that it owes it! or is it not rather to the vitalizing power of Christianity? (Mahalah, Untitled composition... "Physical," emphasis mine)

The Christianity Mahalah references as a safeguard against racial degeneration is the practical Christianity preached by Mann: The meticulous upkeep of physical, intellectual, and moral hygiene, propelled (in her words) by "the strength of religious purpose, of an unwavering conviction that it is [humanity's] duty to *press forward*" (Mahalah, Untitled composition... "Physical," emphasis mine). Practical Christianity can, in this sense, be thought of as a code of moral conduct or a circuit of moral use—a constellation of phrenological habits that habituate the body and mind to improvement.

Students not only internalized the abstract aim of improvement; they also took in impressions about the mental mechanisms for that improvement, in the form of reading and

writing about the bleeding-edge phrenological research of their day. For Mann’s Senior-level course on “Intellectual Philosophy,” Mahalah and Eli were tasked not just with composing theme papers on phrenology, but with being able to distinguish between and evaluate the comparative merits of different phrenological models of mind. Specifically, the Jays contrasted what Eli called the “old system” of Gallian phrenology—that which had originally been introduced by Franz Gall and Johann Spurzheim (or “Drs. Gall & Spurrheime [sic],” as Mahalah labels them)—with the “new phrenology” of the Ohio-based Joseph Rodes Buchanan (Mahalah, “Intellectual Philosophy”).<sup>87</sup> For the phrenologists and “anti-emulation men” at the Yellow Springs college, Buchanan may have been something of a home-grown, home-town hero, publishing as he did out of Cincinnati, and rivalling the Boston-based publishing empire of Fowler and Wells. In Buchanan, Mann would have found a welcome, local mouthpiece for his own phrenological understanding of progressive social engineering. Like Mann, Buchanan held that humans had such a high degree of physical “impressibility” that proper habits and exercise could eliminate disease (*Outlines* 45); the human capacity for “imaginative impressibility” meant that formal education and cultural conditioning could shape “the character of a nation” (49). “Doctrines which we are taught to believe,” Buchanan writes, “exert a steady and powerful influence upon the character. Society and the objects which we habitually observe or contemplate insensibly shape our own character and conduct” (49).

Through this composition coursework, Mann was able to monitor how deeply the minds of his students had been imprinted with the nuances of Buchanan’s “new phrenology.” The goal of instruction at Antioch was, after all, to make an *impression*. Appropriately, then, in their papers for Mann, Eli and Mahalah Jay identify what they understand to be important distinctions between the phrenological models of yesteryear, like Gall’s, and those newly advocated by

Buchanan. In doing so, they also situate *themselves* in this phrenological controversy, identifying where and how they understand the merits of the competing systems being scrutinized.<sup>88</sup> Both Jays take the side of their fellow Ohioan, with Eli declaring that Buchanan had a superior “classification of the intellectual powers” (“Intellectual Faculties”). Mahalah locates Buchanan’s superiority less in his classificatory scheme than in his allowance for the mind to be segmented into a larger number of faculties, more fully mapping the human mind. She writes, “The Gallian system of Phrenology numbers fourteen faculties in the intellectual region, but, Mr. Buchanan, with *what seems to me*, a wiser determination has [sic] observes that the Phrenological principle of subdivision has no very obvious limit” (“Intellectual Philosophy,” emphasis mine).

Within the ecology of assumptions Mann brought to writing instruction and assessments, an assignment that involved reading and composing about Buchanan would likely have been imagined as doing a double developmental service for students. Because any meaningful act of composition is mind-exercising mental measurement, theme papers written about Buchanan would have strengthened and expanded writers’ mental faculties. In addition to this baseline of mental exercise, deep contemplation of Buchanan would have equipped students with phrenological knowledges that would help them continue their self-culture for years to come. As Welsch teaches us in her own reading of Mahalah’s theme papers, even a seemingly impersonal text “*is* personal when personally inflected” (“Thinking” 33), and in arbitrating a controversy over mental organization, the Jays are making both a technical claim about phrenology *and* a personal claim about their own beliefs—positioning and framing themselves relative to it. If this theme writing work strikes us as somehow purely intellectual in orientation, we do well to remember that morality was—as Mann imagined it—fundamentally a matter of acting in accordance with God’s divine plan for human progress. In claiming that Buchanan’s phrenology

“seems” to them more correct and creditable, Mahalah and Eli are rehearsing not just an intellectual stance but a moral one—not an abstract knowledge, but a personal *impression*.

### **Institutionalizing Virtue: “Expression” and “Improvement” in Instructor Criticism**

At first glimpse, instructor criticism of these assignments might strike historians as something of a mystery, and one they might be forgiven for considering too insignificant to merit solving. Read one of Mahalah or Eli’s class writings, and you will find that instructors at Antioch regularly left comments on their students’ compositions, but that these remarks were seldom accompanied by any other corrective marks, and were jarringly brief.<sup>89</sup> The bulk of these are four words or fewer, often variations of the following representative comments: “Very reputable improvement,” “A very good paper,” and “Good sense well expressed [sic].”<sup>90</sup> On some theme papers, even these brief comments were stripped to the bone: “Improved” is the only word to be found in Mahalah’s essay about the “Development of Intellect among the Athenians.” On other compositions, the instructor evaluations interweave two or more of these lines of commentary together, as did one professor who wrote “Improved, in all respects” at the top of a composition written by Eli Jay about the moral character of Robert Bruce—only to add the bookending note “A very good paper” after the end of that composition.<sup>91</sup>

Beyond blanket determinations that these papers were of high quality (“good,” “very good,” etc.), the predominant comments Antioch’s professors made on the compositions were variations on the label “improved” and the curious fixed-expression “good sense, well expressed” (sometimes appearing as “good *thoughts*, well expressed”). What are we to make of this apparent lack of critical detail? Susan Miller has documented that it was commonplace in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century American education for “academy and university teachers” to leave more

granular, punishing evaluative work to the parents of students (and to fathers, specifically); instead, these teachers often “scored work numerically or wrote sparse but charitable comments on the school writing of both female and male students” (*Assuming* 218). Kathleen Ann Welsch has observed that Antioch’s instructors left no concrete record detailing how they arrived at determinations that theme papers were “very good” or “improved” (*Nineteenth-Century*). But in spite of this uncertainty regarding how instructors determined quality, we learn much from dwelling on the qualities instructors took the time to inscribe in their students’ papers when appraising them. Over and over, the instructor remarks eschew engagement with the specific content of student writings in favor of telling variations of the same simple story, central to the assessment-rhetorical aims of Antioch: Successful composition was a testament to its author’s sense, expressive powers, and, above all, improvement. Instructor comments can be read as giving voice to institutional preoccupations and aims, framing high quality student writings as emblems of a virtuous commitment to improvement and of the developing sense-making faculties that facilitate composition.

To get a sense for how even threadbare instructor criticism at Antioch may have participated in the effort to compose improvement-oriented hygienic writers, let us look to the evaluative remarks that adorn Mahalah’s sophomore theme paper on the “Life and Character of William Tell.” (Unfortunately, no peer criticism for this same theme paper has survived.) Helpfully, the remarks on this particular paper combine all three of the most common comments left to students. These faint, fading comments begin with the declarative header note “Improved, in all respects,” and conclude with an uncharacteristically generous *two* sentence note at the end of Mahalah’s composition: “An excellent paper. Good thoughts, well expressed.” Deciphering first the seemingly bromidic header note, we do well to remember that “improvement” was the

phrenological watchword for educational progress at Antioch and had explicit resonances with Mann's eugenic project to cultivate the New American race.

Not only was Mahalah tasked with writing papers explicitly *about* improvement, she would have found this idea saturating institutional life at Antioch. When delivering Sunday sermons to his Yellow Springs flock, President Mann preached the phrenological gospel of progress, stitching together his talk of improvement with a moral thread: "How strong...the desire of perfection in the heart of a good man; what grief over error; what delightful anticipations of improvement!" (*Twelve Sermons* 269). Indeed, as early as his *Inaugural Address* as Antioch President, Mann rhapsodized about educational self-improvement—by which he meant "improvement of the self," not "self-reliant improvement"—teaching his new students that it "must precede all other improvement. ... Whatever new wonders of art, or genius, or utility are yet to enrich the world, all must first have their prototypes and models in the gorgeous chambers of the brain" (72-3). For an instructor to inscribe "improvement" into a student's theme paper was, therefore, a subtle rhetorical act: Marking the page in this way, instructors identified the student's composition with the institution's race-writing agenda, framing and certifying the composition's quality relative to the virtue of improvement.

The local significance of the instructor comments left at the end of Mahalah's paper—"Good thoughts, well expressed"—is more obscure, at least until we consult what were then Antioch's assigned texts for instruction in rhetoric and in writing: Richard Green Parker's *Progressive Exercises in English Composition* and Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric*.<sup>92</sup> In each of these texts, "thoughts" (or "sense") and "expression" enjoyed a special status as the two component parts of writing, explaining its psychological inner-workings. Both Parker and Whately subscribed to a faculty psychology-informed theory of composition-rhetoric that Sharon

Crowley has termed *methodical memory*, which assumes “that the mind’s sequential workings were accurately inscribed in memory and could be accurately reproduced upon demand” (*Methodical*, 12). Take in good thoughts and, if they are inscribed in the memory, you will be prepared to properly and powerfully express them. By this methodical logic, Parker teaches that his *progressive* exercises in English composition are instruments for promoting “the progress of thought” (7) and “cultivating the imagination” (8), while helping students rehearse new methods for externalizing the ever-more sophisticated sequences of (“trains”) of thought they had internalized. For Whately and other New Rhetoricians, “Signs are capable of assuming the character of the experience they represent, so that some are better than others in impressing upon the mind (literally) the quality of their referents” (Berlin 71). High-quality expression was the product of high-quality thought, and also was a carrier for it—a vector for the spread of mental culture, with expression *impressing* thoughts on the minds of others. *Good thoughts, well expressed*: A source and sign of mental progress.

The deeper target of classroom writing assessment is the assessment of the writer’s mind, with theme papers supplying a method and proxy for this inward reading. Parker and Whately are all too happy to point this out—at times, even explicitly warning readers away from the assumption that improvements in student writing are to be thought of as ends in themselves, divorced from improvements in the mental quality and health of the student writer. Whately, for instance, argues in his *Elements* that “the benefit proposed does not consist in the intrinsic value of the composition, but in the *exercise* to the pupil’s mind” (*Elements* 27-8, emphasis in original). Composition is not an end in itself, but a whetstone of sorts for sharpening thought. To be sure, Crowley acknowledges this focus, claiming that this classroom composition-rhetoric was a pedagogy “centrally, if quietly, concerned about the quality of authorial minds”

(*Methodical* 13). In the story Crowley tells, attention to writing quality is a displaced attention to human quality, with teachers targeting student texts because student minds were outside their locus of intervention. Correcting compositions would have to tide these progress-minded pedagogues over:

since it was beyond the province of pedagogues to contribute to the quality of minds—aside from recommending certain *habits* and *practices that might strengthen them*—writers in the later tradition [i.e., the pedagogy of methodical memory] transferred its concern with minds to concern with the shape of texts. The hope was that a well-formed text would reflect a well-oiled mind at work. (Crowley, *Methodical* 13 emphasis mine)

Yet while this account comes close to capturing the state of play Antioch’s students found themselves composing within, it does not fully capture the race-writing power that Mann and his phrenological circle would have assumed mental habits have. Mann valued composition—and education, generally—because he believed contributing to the quality of minds was precisely the province of pedagogues, not somehow beyond it. Within an institutional culture that equates taking in “good sense” as a source of race-writing, and that assesses how thoughts are “expressed” as a means of inwardly reading racial development, the curious expression “good sense, well expressed” would have indexed a larger ecology of meanings, crediting the author for her mental exercise and hygiene. Together with the comment that Mahalah had “Improved, in all respects,” these instances of instructor criticism—typical for the theme papers that survive—could have been read a rhetorical shorthand for an institutionally-salient claim about the writer’s virtues: commitments to mental exercise and improvement, legible in the second skin of the page.

Once we excavate these additional layers of institutional meaning, we might be less surprised to find that—if the account left to us by Ada Shepard is any indication—Antioch’s students found hidden depths beneath the thin surfaces of their instructors’ thin criticisms. With a



sigh of relief, Shepard recounts her joy at reading the (characteristically brief) criticism left by Professor William Doherty on her final composition for his sophomore-level Rhetoric and Belles Lettres course. Writing to her sister in an 1854 letter, Shepard reminds her reader, “I told you how miserable I thought my essay. Prof. Doherty seemed to disagree with me in opinion, and wrote something very nice on it. He made a general remark upon my exercises during the term, which is the source of the greatest delight to me, for I had felt terribly about them all. It is astonishing that the people here judge me so leniently in all respects” (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 27 Nov. 1854). Fittingly, Doherty’s criticism of Shepard’s final paper seems to survive only in the *impression* it left in her mind; an impression of the approval expressed by Doherty—and, by extension, the institution he speaks for—which Shepard codes as both a source of delight and, surprisingly, a sign of communal *leniency*. Perhaps Shepard, taking Antioch’s preferred virtues to heart, felt she still had more improving to do.

### **The Ethics of Error-Fixation: Peer Criticism as Mental and Moral Management**

Instructor-led assessment at Antioch enjoined students to think of their papers in sweeping, evaluative terms. In identifying student work as the “well-expressed” display of “good thoughts,” these comments seem to reinforce the notion that these papers are the products of a mind-altering, mind-expanding psychological process. They coach students in thinking of their writings longitudinally as emblems of improvement—each “improved” paper, testifying to the potential for human progress. This level of abstract feedback *zooms out* to locate students in the great march of development, urging them to understand themselves as progressive composing subjects. By contrast, peer criticisms at Antioch *zoom in*, proposing a parallel relationship to

course compositions—one more attentive to word- and punctuation-level features of writing, and to the moral character inwardly read between the lines of each theme paper.

While these peer criticisms appear, on the surface, to dwell on formal features of writing at the expense of weightier concerns—privileging the superficial over the substantial—reconsideration of these assessments within Antioch’s writing ecology tells us a different story. As we find below, peer criticisms are rhetorically-textured *didactic* documents, with peers tutoring student authors in how their theme papers can be read, interpreted, and improved. Error, in these documents, takes on cultural and psychological significance; peer critics inwardly read the inner qualities of their classmates *through* and *against* the presence of error.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, these critics—through the act of composing a theme criticism—assume a new writerly subject position: that of race-writing pedagogue, isolating errors in their peers’ minds by pointing out and pruning errors in their theme papers. Not for nothing, Antioch’s required preparatory school textbook, Parker’s *Progressive Exercises*, identifies “Criticism” as a sophisticated genre of writing in itself, governed by psychological, rhetorical, and moral principles for coaching and correcting one’s audience. In engaging in this form of “ordinary” or “ephemeral” classroom writing, the peer critic learns to inhabit the subject position that attaches to that form—learns to, as Susan Miller might say, “appropriate and mutate” the identity that peer criticism makes culturally “available” (*Assuming* 1). Thus, whenever peer critics make moralizing comments about the virtues of the writer being criticized, they are—at once—*providing* their classmates a kind of cultural pedagogy (teaching them how to relate to and inwardly read their own writings), and also *receiving* a kind of cultural pedagogy themselves (learning how to relate to and read the writings of others). Re-reading peer criticism at Antioch against this interpretative backdrop, we gain new insights into the cultural meanings and social

stakes of peer assessment at the college—and how the assumptions at work in peer criticism dovetailed with Mann’s race-writing aims for instruction.

To textually ground this exploration, let us begin by considering one of the most detailed surviving theme criticisms, a piece written by Ada Shepard to Mahalah Jay, responding to the latter’s progress-centric paper “Was the Norman Conquest a Benefit to England?” The instructor evaluation of this essay is characteristically threadbare, suggesting only a vague institutional approbation: “A good paper.”<sup>94</sup> By contrast, Shepard’s commentary consists of six lines of critique, each addressing a different aspect of Mahalah’s prose. Reproduced in full, this document reads:

Criticism on the Exercise of Mrs. Mahalah Jay, by A. A. Shepard, Oct. 9th, 1854

In the dating of the composition, I notice a small letter at the commencement of the abbreviation for October, instead of a capital.

Near the bottom of the third page I should think that the article “the” should be inserted between “are” and “inconveniences.”

The method displayed in this essay is particularly pleasing. One is not allowed to lose sight of the subject, for a moment.

The trains of thought follow each other naturally and happily.

She has seized upon the most important points of the subject, and presented us with an interesting exercise.

Want of time and capacity prevent me from making an extended criticism. (A. Shepard, “Criticism on the Exercise”)

Triangulating Shepard’s criticism with Parker’s guidelines and with excerpts from other peer assessments written by students from Antioch’s first decade, we get a taste for the kind of cultural pedagogy these documents trafficked in. setting aside, for the moment, Shepard’s commentary on Mahalah’s method and the subject of her essay—topics we return to in the next section below—two aspects of this theme criticism are immediately of note. First, the theme criticism opens by documenting mistakes in Mahalah’s prose, signaling the primacy of error-fixation to the critical position Shepard assumes. Second, this theme criticism closes with an

unexpectedly apologetic note, with Shepard characterizing not Mahalah's writing, but *herself as critic*. In both these bookending instances, peer assessment provides "space[s] for writing that teaches *us* to ourselves" (S. Miller, *Assuming* 13, emphasis mine), inculcating in Antioch's writing students two interrelated habits of mind: a critical sensitivity to error, and a self-critical attention to one's own capacity for identifying it. These were habits necessary for the hygienic writers Mann sought to produce—and peer writing assessment supplied a space for developing them.

Turning to the first two lines of Shepard's velvet-gloved criticism, we find her inviting Mahalah to revisit places in her theme paper where the mechanics of her writing have been faulty, with lapses in form disfiguring the page. Collegial but critical, Shepard "notice[s]" that Mahalah has failed to capitalize "Oct.," and that she has written a sentence where the absent presence of a definite article ("the") confronts readers with an "eyesore," as Tobin Siebers might call it (69-71), in need of remedying. Commentary of this kind, guiding readers to spot blemishes on the second skin of the page, makes up the bulk of the surviving peer criticisms made by Antioch's students—so much so that, when peers are unable to identify errors, they often find themselves with little else to say. One 1855 peer assessment written to Mahalah by Henry Clay Badger reads simply, "I find no error" (Criticism... "Cicero's Views"). Another, written by Shepard to Mahalah that same year, identifies only a misspelled word, before declaring of Mahalah's writing "[o]therwise, it is beyond my criticism" (Criticism... "Advantages"). This aesthetic attention to surface features of writing—pointing out blemishes in need of correcting—could also be read as a subtle moral criticism of the theme writer. In his *Progressive Exercises*, Parker characterizes mechanical errors in writing as a moral hazard and slippery slope, "for negligence in the mechanical execution will induce the neglect of the more important qualities"

(142). What Parker prescribes, here, is that we read written error as making visible the otherwise hidden mental habits of students. Error is indicative of a deeper writerly vice—negligence—and this habitual lack of care might metastasize, if not caught and cured by a more careful outside critic. As Susan Miller might put it, Parker equates “graphic errors to moral faults and social mistakes” (S. Miller, *Assuming* 218). In this spirit, Parker expects that when authors correct their mistakes on the page, this correction signals or stimulates the development of improved mental habits. He tells his readers that “writing over the theme a second time will *imprint the corrections in the pupil’s mind*” (142, emphasis mine).

For their parts, Antioch peer critics were not shy about explicitly identifying their classmates’ writerly virtues—like care and carefulness—with the mechanical correctness of their theme papers. Such is the case when Phineas H. Clemens assessed Eli Jay’s essay on the “Open Sea in the Arctic Ocean,” and found Eli’s second skin almost entirely without blemish: “With ... one exception [in spelling], the paper is free from errors, & the *care evinced* in the punctuation, & grammatical structures of the sentences *reflects credit upon its author*” (“Remarks upon the essay of Eli Jay,” emphasis mine). And, in John Barns Weston’s criticism of another of Eli’s theme papers—“On the Use and Abuse of Gesture in Public Speaking”—in which “[v]ery few errors are detected,” the critic underscores the apparent virtues of the text—virtues that Weston announces without explaining, save for their implied connection with Eli’s (generally) error-free prose. “I find this paper *well and carefully* written, containing *approved sentiment* expressed in *chaste and proper* language” (emphasis mine). In praising the “approved sentiment” contained in Eli’s essay, Weston is apparently also approving of the moral sentiment of Eli’s paper.

What sentiment, then, is co-signed by Weston-as-critic? Eli discloses, in the opening lines of his theme paper, a sentimental attachment to linguistic and civilizational hierarchy,

judging the quality of nation's development through its people's preferences for expression: "Rude and uncultivated nations, who need [read: lack] words to express their ideas fully, often make use of signs to communicate what they wish to say. So it is with individuals who do not understand each others [sic] language" (emphasis mine). *Thoughts of indeterminate quality, rudely expressed*. The sentiment at the heart of Eli's essay is that the "use or abuse of gesture" indexes the level of cultivation enjoyed by the speaker—or that of the nation she hails from. The moral virtue Weston credits to Eli's writing is seemingly that his theme paper registers, in the (ab)use of gesture, the developmental stakes of public communication. Failure to gesture appropriately is, in Eli's account, to group oneself with those lagging in the march of civilizational progress. Commendation for the sentimental content of essays—while less common than error-fixation—was an important element of peer criticism at Antioch, which we return to at length in the next section.

To the extent we are inclined to read Weston's talk of "chaste and proper language" signaling a preference for writing that embodies, in some way, stylistic purity and grammatical propriety, we can look to Parker's *Progressive Exercises* for guidance about what these designations might have meant.<sup>95</sup> "Purity of style," Antioch's required composition textbook tells us, "consists in the use of such words, and such constructions, as belonging to the idiom of the language which we speak,"—that is, *English*—"in opposition to words and phrases that are taken from other languages, or that are ungrammatical, obsolete, new-coined, or used without proper authority" (Parker 81). Fundamentally conservative, this understanding of "purity" also wears anxieties about identity on its metaphorical sleeve. Foreign words pollute the purity of the English mother tongue, and "*unless where necessity requires them, should never be admitted into our composition*" (82, emphasis in original; see also Mann, "Barbarisms"). Considering the close

association imagined at this time between language use and racial identity (see Chapter 2), this stylistic concern over the purity of the English language can be read as an anxiety about *racial* admixture and purity. Parker's definition of "propriety" underscores this point, and provides another dimension along which the "correctness" of a text might have been configured by Antioch's students:

Propriety of language is the selection of such words as the best usage has appropriated to those ideas which we intend to express by them, in opposition to *low* expressions, and to words and phrases which would be less significant of the ideas that we mean to convey. Style may be pure, that is, it may be *strictly English, without Scotticisms or Gallicisms*, or ungrammatical, irregular expressions of any kind, and may, nevertheless, be deficient in propriety; for the words may be ill chosen, not adapted to the subject, nor fully expressive of the author's sense. (82, emphasis mine)

If Weston judged Eli's prose to be pure and propriety in these terms, he would be identifying as virtues of Eli's writing not just its absence of solecisms and careless errors, but also its freedom from foreign barbarisms and "low expressions"—each, in its way, a linguistic contaminant that edges English closer to degeneration. Concern over linguistic admixture, however, had its limits. As we will see in the next section, concern over the English language's purity was something of a moving target, selectively applied to the tongues of disfavored populations, and forgotten in those cases where admixture was judged unthreatening or desirable.

Regardless of how we read these more esoteric aspects of Weston's criticism, the broader message it communicates is understood easily enough. Eli's writing was successful because it conforms with standards of correct, progressive English—a conformity that carries the charge of moral rectitude and superior social standing. Susan Miller suggests that the possessive investment in the elimination of written error stems from a sense that "correct" writing inducts the writer into full or "universal" humanity. "Good spelling" offers what Miller calls "a deceptively humble sign of the universal subject's control over language"—but the deeper

fantasy at work in this corrective system is that mastery over “the esoteric conventions of written language” grants the writer a kind of universal intelligibility among the learned and landed, a promise of social authority, “*standing*,” and “acceptance” (*Assuming* 220, emphasis in original). The good writer displays propriety in *character*, in both senses of that word. By necessity, mistakes in writing mark the writer as failing to meet this standard of full human belonging.

Indulging in a variant of this logic, Mann framed the identification of error as an ethical duty for critics of writing, just as the elimination of error was an ethical duty for writers. The race-writing ethic for the critic of writing was, in his words, to isolate error not “in a censorious or a boastful spirit, but in the hope that they may be seen and corrected by the present generation, and not transmitted as a shameful heritage to the next” (“Barbarisms” 84). As though channeling and responding to this imperative, theme criticisms at Antioch often include an apologetic note, with peer critics identifying their own *lack* of critical insight as a personal failing. Shepard’s criticism above concludes in kind, confessing to Mahalah, “Want of time and capacity prevent me from making an extended criticism.” Of course, there is a sense in which a statement like this is an affectation, politely ending the criticism with a performance of humility. But it is nonetheless noteworthy that the form taken by this affectation is self-critical, pre-emptively apologizing for its critical limitations, and perhaps explaining why Shepard-as-critic may have left some errors in Mahalah’s prose unidentified. Through this self-characterization, we witness Shepard not only inhabiting the subject position of critic, but appraising her own performance from this position—self-evaluating her fulfillment of the graphic identity she has begun to compose for herself. Criticality is, Shepard indicates, a function of *time*—perhaps implicitly the virtue of commitment, of devoting time—but also is a function of *capacity*. The length and quality of a peer criticism, as a written object and phrenological surface, can be inwardly read to



scrutinize the moral and mental character of its author. And in Shepard's closing comment, she discloses that she has, in some way, turned the powers of *inward reading* to read *herself* inwardly—exposing and seeking pardon for her own (want of) capacity.

Thumbing through the surviving theme criticisms in the Antioch and Earlham college archives, we find Shepard is not alone in taking this kind of apologetic stance. It was customary for Antioch's critics to associate the inability to identify errors with their own impoverished mental capacity or powers. One assessment made of Mahalah's writing by Adaline Williams reads simply, "This is an essay of superior merit and entirely beyond my *feeble powers* of criticism" ("Criticism on the paper of Ms. Jay by A. Williams," 10 Feb. 1856; qtd. also in Welsch, *Nineteenth-Century*). Another, by Roswell Gilbert Horr, begins "This essay is free from mistakes, so far as the *feeble powers* of the critic are able to determine" (Untitled Criticism, 1856-1857?, emphases mine). In his appraisal of Eli Jay's writings for their Junior-level logic class, Clemens even self-critically riffs, "This paper contains a logic too nearly perfect for an illogical critic to criticize" (Criticism, 6 May 1856). Though we might question the severity with which these self-critiques are issued—on the whole, they seem less self-flagellating than *pro forma*—the underlying association reinforced by these comments is clear enough. Insufficient criticality, on the part of the peer critic, is another manifestation of the inferior mental power and capacity Mann sought to discipline out of existence. By implication, then, the ability to identify and root out errors certifies (or brings about) possession of an active, progressive, *hygienic* mind.

### **Methodizing Morality: Peer Assessing the Trains of Hygienic Thought**

As Ada's assessment of Mahalah's "Norman Conquest" essay shows, error-fixation may have been the first, most immediate focus of theme criticism, but critics did not bar themselves

from entering upon commentary about the content of their peers' papers. As or more important than the implicit moral exercise of mechanically careful composition was a theme paper's explicit engagement with moral sentiments and examples—something we have already observed above, in Weston's praise for the "approved sentiment" found in Eli's writing. It is this attention to the moral substance of theme papers that Shepard touches on when she quite literally underlines Mahalah's "method" as a laudable and "pleasing" aspect of her writing, in that it ensures readers not "lose sight of the subject, for a moment." In closely examining the (good) thoughts (well) expressed in Mahalah's paper on the Norman Conquest, we learn something specific about the kinds of content lauded by peer critics: One mark of hygienic writing was writing that remarked on hygiene and improvement, revealing these subjects to be inscribed in the writer's mind.

That Mahalah displays a pleasing method in her writing—one that never loses sight of her theme's subject—signals both an intellectual and a moral achievement on her part. *Method*, Sharon Crowley reminds us, "designate[s] any orderly or systematic procedure" (*Methodical* 33). As a theory of invention in written composition, method enters the 19<sup>th</sup>-century education scene through the work of George Campbell, for whom "[i]nvention consisted in the rhetor's retrospective review of her ideas and the connections made between them; arrangement consisted in composing a discourse where the ordering of parts exactly reflected whatever mental processes"—that is, whatever method—"had been followed in reaching conclusions" (Crowley, *Methodical* 45). Parker's *Progressive Rhetoric* enlists "methodizing" as a term of art for dividing up and outlining a composition (what, to present day readers, might be thought of as a "pre-writing" part of the composing process). To "*methodize* a subject" is, in Parker's words, to "make the outlines or skeleton of a subject" by listing the sections (that is, "heads, or divisions")

to be featured in the essay (120, emphasis in original). Such work is an essential predicate for composing, “for, it will be recollected, no one can write well, who has no ability to present his subject in a methodical manner.”

As an intellectual feat, composing *methodically* displays and expands Mahalah’s capacity for sustained, controlled, and focused mental engagement. Ada’s praise for Mahalah’s “trains of thought” speaks to this connection, considering the meaning this term had within the psychology of writing promoted by Parker and Whately, Antioch’s two required textual authorities for composition theory. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Parker imagined the mind as working “by the principle of association,” where words and phrases enter the mind and become associated with other words and phrases to “form ... *a train of thought*” (7). As the mind grows in strength and sophistication, the trains of thought likewise become clearer, longer, and more complex. It is for this reason that Parker could think of his progressive exercises as coterminous with “the progress of thought.” What else was *thinking*, if not a kind of mastery over language and the trains of thought taking form in the mind? Composition resulted from the mental work of disciplining and arranging one’s (trains) of thought. For Whately, this psychology supplied the reason why student writers needed first to deeply engage with the topic to be written on. If “a young or ill-instructed writer” were to “content himself with ... a vague and indistinct view of the point he is to aim at, ... the whole train of his reasoning is in consequence affected with a corresponding perplexity, obscurity, and looseness” (*Elements* 32). Mental failure necessarily results in failure on the page because composition is, at its core, an externalization of the composer’s mind—the depth and quality of the pedagogical inscriptions made in students’ heads are legible in every stroke of the pen. *Thoughts* taken in, then outwardly *expressed*.

Note that it is Mahalah's thoughts that preoccupy this part of Ada's criticism; writing is the medium through which those thoughts are made visible; written composition is the vehicle for assessing the composition of Mahalah's mind—the *trains* it is capable of composing. This intellectual feat is also a moral one, insofar as the subject Mahalah has laudably and successfully “seized upon”—and methodically displayed mental mastery of—is a *moral* theme, intended to ennoble the mind contemplating and composing it. To compose methodically, conjuring forth natural and happy trains of thought, requires that the writer deeply internalize the topic in question, “lay[ing] down distinctly in his own mind”—as Whately might say—“the proposition or propositions to be proved” (*Elements* 31-32). In Mahalah's case, answering “Was the Norman Conquest a Benefit to England?” in the affirmative required her to imagine the moral grounds on which conquest can be justified, weighing the horror of conquest and tyranny against the benefits reaped from England's bloodied, subjugated soil. For Parker, even when overtly moral topics were not involved, composing *morally* was a foundational imperative: “nothing must be introduced at variance with truth or with morals” (141). On this count, it is worth dwelling on the fact that neither Shepard nor the instructor who commented on Mahalah's theme paper (writing only, “A good paper”) found anything morally amiss in Mahalah's theme paper. Considering the paper's content, the silent approval of Mahalah's conclusions double as an indication of the overwhelming priority placed at Antioch on the ideals of progress and hygiene, supervening all other moral concerns.

After contemplating the theme of the Norman Conquest, Mahalah reports that she has no interest in “attempting to excuse” the motives for, or the “cruelty and avarice” of the “undertaking” (“Was the Norman”). Despite these reservations, she concludes “that, in the providence of God, adverse circumstances worked together for good, and that England, in

subsequent ages was more enlightened for her subjection.” Conquest and colonization may be objectionable, but in the service of human improvement, there is seemingly little Antioch’s students will not forgive. The Normans’ “intercourse with the Saxons, [sic] was very favorable to the refinement and improvement of that nation [England], which at that time was rude, *ignorant of letters*, unskilled in the mechanical arts, and addicted to intemperance[,] riot and disorder” (emphasis mine). In effect, Mahalah ends up crediting the conquering Normans with linguistic and racial superiority over the Anglo-Saxons they subjugated. Governance by, and cultural proximity to, these more cultivated forms of life set the English on the path of progress they enjoy in modernity. The mental exercise conferred to Mahalah by this work must have been considerable, in light of the mental gymnastics such a stance required.

William the Conqueror, Mahalah tells us, did more than decide to “entirely ... abolish the ruder English” in favor of the more sophisticated French language—he attempted to accomplish this feat through his patronage of education, “order[ing] that in all the schools throughout England, the youth should be instructed in the French tongue” (M. Jay “Was the Norman”). Here, linguistic admixture is not a threat to purity, but instead a desirable means of cultivation. Positioning the “rudeness” of the medieval English language as an index for, or root of, the rudeness of the Anglo-Saxons as a race, Mahalah credits the conquering Normans with improving the English national body by taming the English tongue. “To this attention from William [the Conqueror], the mixture of the English language with the French, and its consequent refinement, are, in great measure, owing,” she writes. Remarkably, the Norman conquest is narrated by Mahalah as its own kind of cultural pedagogy, cultivating and improving the English through their forceful example. Putting the matter as finely as possible, Mahalah pronounces, “we conclude that England was benefited by a conquest, grievous though it was in

itself, which, nevertheless, opened the way for the introduction of the rudiments of science and cultivation, and for the correction of the rough and licentious manners of her people.” Concerns over racial and linguistic purity are suspended because the conquering population is imagined to be superior in mental development. Racial progress trumps concerns over racial purity—or, perhaps more accurately, anxieties over purity emerge only in those instances where the mixture is with a population imagined in some way to be inferior.

This, then, is the *subject* Shepard lauds Mahalah for never allowing readers to lose sight of: The racial improvement of the English, made possible by Norman conquest. Observe one of the “trains of thought” Shepard assesses as praiseworthy:

Nor in language only, were the Normans superior to the English, but in every thing that pertains to civilization. They were a noble race, the noblest upon earth. They were temperate and peculiarly free from every gross vice. They were greatly susceptible of, and eager for, improvement in everything, graceful and refining. They had made considerable advances in learning, and even before the Norman Conquest, had filled many offices, in England, which required a knowledge of letters. They took with them to the conquered land, a taste for the arts and refinements of civilized life. They built splendid palaces, instead of the huts that had contented the English nobility. (M. Jay, “Was the Norman,” emphasis in original)

The chain of associations composed by Mahalah transports readers across a potentially treacherous terrain of assumptions. Readers travel with Mahalah as she associates her assertion of Norman civilizational superiority with the idea of Norman *racial* superiority, itself associated with the Normans’ moral habits, and progressive dispositions, and advancement in literacy—the defining features of Norman civilizational-and-racial superiority. All of which, when associated with the Norman’s violent subjugation of the English, terminates (“naturally” and “happily,” Shepard finds) at Mahalah’s conclusion that the English are not victims but *beneficiaries* of conquest by so noble a race. Equal parts perplexing and breathtaking in its horror, Mahalah’s

claim seems to say: If only those put to the sword by their colonizers could have known the happy, natural end of their conquest!

Virtue is in the inward eye of the beholding critic. That Mahalah's encomium on the benefits of colonialist violence avoids moral censure should not lead us to conclude that it was subjected to no moral scrutiny. We are safer in assuming that the moral code advocated in Mahalah's theme paper was coded by its critics as hygienic and consistent with Antioch's founding preoccupation with progress. Uplifted from their huts—Mahalah's apparent shorthand for civilizational underdevelopment—the Anglo-Saxon race has been elevated from a rude to a progressive position in the march of civilizations. Such was, after a fashion, the moral end Mann sought for all humanity—and Mahalah's paper demonstrated that she had engaged with “the important points” of this subject methodically, as Shepard might say.

### **Race Betterment through the Education of Women**

“During his final years at Antioch, the quest for biological perfectibility was never far from Mann's mind,” Stephen Tomlinson writes (296). Co-education—including co-educational writing assessment—was important to this quest. As discussed in the previous chapter, Antioch College was the first school of its kind to permit co-education of the sexes that was not only *co-present*—in the sense of men and women being on the same campus—but also *co-equal*, in the sense of men and women being exercised by the same curricular requirements. At Antioch, both men and women received the same kind of hygienic writing instruction, and this instruction included, as one of its most central features, peer assessment between the sexes—the first recorded school to allow, much less require, the practice. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I provide the first exploration of this curious practice, attending to how it structured

relationships between men and women that were imagined to be sexually virtuous and race-hygienic. Co-educational assessment improved men and women in a host of ways, not least of which was cultivating in students a sexual criticality and selectiveness—preparing them to identify reproductively fit *mates* through the practice of inwardly reading the compositions of their *classmates*.

Before proceeding to consider this erotics of writing assessment in greater depth, it is necessary for us first to recover Mann's more general beliefs about the race-writing potential to be tapped in the (co-)education of women—beliefs that have been substantially misrepresented in existing scholarship. To read the accounts of Mann's time at Antioch written by historians Lindal Buchanan, Kathleen Ann Welsch, and John Rury and Glenn Harper is to learn that the sexual ideal informing Mann's reforms placed the aim of equal education beyond Antioch's reach, sabotaging its best laid plans and best intentions for sexual progress. They observe that while Mann extended to women an unprecedented degree of curricular equality at Antioch—taking the same courses as men, completing the same kinds of writing assignments, and sharing the same recitation room space—but that he was far less sanguine about the broader movement for “women's rights,” forcefully rejecting the idea that women were suited to the same professions as men and railing against the idea of women in politics. He also worked assiduously to curtail unsupervised social intercourse outside of the classroom, fearing that the race-writing curricular work of *cultural* reproduction might be undermined by the wanton extracurricular recreation of *sexual* reproduction (see Rury and Harper).

Bearing sexist and sex-fearing features like these in mind, it becomes clearer why scholars have concluded that Mann's “support for coeducation was *far from unequivocal*” (Rury & Harper 486), that his “conviction that there were essential differences between the sexes ...



*tempered* his commitment to equal education” (L. Buchanan 68), and that his “commitment to women’s full intellectual development was *tempered* by his preoccupation with their moral development in a coeducational environment” (Welsch “Thinking” 17) (emphases mine). The spirit of these conclusions is hard to contest, but they mistake Mann’s beliefs about the education of women in a subtle but important way. Mann’s commitments to the education of women were not undercut or undermined by his sexist beliefs—they were underwritten by these beliefs. Mann’s commitment to the equal education of women at Antioch was funded by his belief that inclusion of this kind was important—maybe even essential—for meaningful racial progress and population control. And as we will encounter in the next section, writing assessment was centrally implicated in regulating the inclusion of women, structuring social intercourse between the sexes in ways believed to secure race betterment. As a prelude to this next section, let us recover Mann’s assumptions about sex, restraint, and over-population—assumptions that provide the assessment-rhetorical context for the erotics of writing assessment at Antioch.

Mann’s desire to eradicate moral idiocy in the ranks of the college educated was not the only level at which he fantasized about population control. Beyond this top-down danger threatened by morally imbecilic elites, there was a more mundane moral hazard jeopardizing the population from the bottom-up: Sex. Unrestrained indulgence of our sexual appetites could swell the population in ways that deplete earth’s natural resources. As a matter of political economy, Mann found himself publicly reckoning with the dismal predictions of Thomas Robert Malthus, whose infamous 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* theorized that, because population (“when unchecked”) grows geometrically and food can only be increased arithmetically, there must be “a strong and constantly operating check on the population from the difficulty of subsistence”—a check cashed (so to speak) in the form of deprivation and starvation, warfare

over scarce resources, and mass death (71). During his time as the Congressional Representative for Massachusetts' 8<sup>th</sup> District, Mann had spoken on Malthus's predictions in the House Chamber, declaring them correct in cases of civilizational underdevelopment. Overpopulation and the miseries it brings were everywhere in evidence among putatively "savage" peoples:

Among savage nations, or nomadic tribes, the population equals the means of subsistence. ... Among such people, there is always a tendency to increase faster than the means of living increase. ... Dam up a fountain, and the weight of the accumulating strata will eventually check the outflow from the spring. So it is of a savage population. *Of them, the Malthusian theory is true.* (H. Mann, *Slavery* 129, emphasis mine)

Mann was less willing to concede that the Malthusian theory was true of the American population. Malthus had posed moral restraint as one potential source for controlling and slowing the rate of population growth—but he did not have much confidence in sexual moderation as a solution, because as a natural matter, "the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state" (70), regardless of our attempts to subdue them. Mann was more bullish on the potential for restraint—provided that the American people received proper moral discipline through educational instruction and assessment.

Mann devotes a lengthy section of his 1854 *Demands of the Age on Colleges* address to repudiating Malthus's "fatal idea," asserting instead that widespread moral education was an effective means of population control. Malthusian population theory, Mann mocks, "derives all its plausibility from the assumption that Appetite is never to be brought under the dominion of Reason and Conscience" (42). Happily, humanity need not rely on its appetites and untutored tendencies for sexual guidance. Moral education can be enlisted to the cause of "finding barriers to the excessive multiplication of the human race," inscribing in the minds of impressionable students "those restraints on the appetites which forethought, duty, and religion supply" (42). Putting the point more finely, Mann clarifies in a footnote, added to the published text of his

speech that “Malthus is demonstrably right *in his theory*. The infinitude of his mistake consisted in his maintaining that the remedy is destruction, instead of showing that *moral prevention* is the antidote” (43-4, footnote 1, emphasis in original). Empowered by moral education, would-be-parents are able to restrain their sexual appetites and do their part to prevent over-population. “There is no more self-evident truth than that, in certain circumstances, and those circumstances, too, not difficult to be imagined, it is a greater crime to give life than it would be to take it; a greater crime to be a parent than to be a murderer,” Mann judged (43-4). The proper path to population control was, he believed, clear: “Intelligent forethought, reason, conscience, then, in the formation of matrimonial connections, and not starvation, war, and pestilence, are the true antidotes against the calamities prophesied by Malthus, and assumed by him and all his school to be the divinely-ordained and ever-continuing calamity of the human race.”

Cultivate women, and the Malthusian crisis could be averted. The contagious spread of moral imbecility could be slowed—maybe even quarantined and stopped. This was the core of Mann’s “Great Experiment.” Though nowhere discussed in even our most critical and detailed scholarship, the “father of the common school” explicitly imagined the stakes of *sexual* equality in *racial* terms. In Mann’s lecture *A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Woman*, released just a handful of weeks before his inauguration as Antioch’s first President, he locates the project of race-writing as the beating heart of his promotion of equal education for women. “I hold it as an axiom,” he proclaimed, “that the first step which a community, desiring most rapidly and certainly to improve itself, is bound to take, is to improve the physical, mental and moral condition of its daughters” (*A Few Thoughts... Woman* 66). If women fell short in fulfilling their race-writing potential, it was hardly fair to blame them: “It is the fault of man that woman has yet done so little for the advancement of the race. Man has made great inventions and great

discoveries; but his crowning achievement will consist in enlisting the divinely-adapted energies of woman in the work of regenerating the world” (66-7).

Sponsorship of women’s education provided a means of simultaneously increasing population quality, decreasing population quantity, and—through women’s supposedly greater powers of moral suasion (see also Tomlinson 290)—elevating the moral standing of the impressionable men sharing their classrooms. These were women’s powers, and their solemnest duties.<sup>96</sup> Failure to properly educate women was an overdetermined hazard to racial health and progress, risking degeneration through four interrelated sites for eugenic development: 1) women’s own developmental cultivation through mental exercise, 2) women’s ability to cultivate children through nurture, 3) the cultivation women biologically transmit to their children, progressing or regressing the race, and 4) the sexual pedagogy and moral cultivation that co-education provides—each of which, I discuss briefly below, with particular attention paid to the last, detailed at length in the next section of this chapter.

First, and most fundamentally, Mann acknowledged that because women constituted around half of the race, to keep them mentally “impoverished” was to impoverish the race itself (*A Few Thoughts... Woman* 74). “The female has every natural right to a full and complete mental development which belongs to the other sex,” Mann believed (57), yet when “[r]ising from academies to colleges, with two or three very modern exceptions, we lose sight of the female portion of the race altogether” (59). Second, the waste of women’s pedagogical talent discussed above was more than an opportunity squandered—unintelligent or immoral child-rearing, taken to its natural extreme, spread disability and death. Men were less constitutionally equipped for this work. “Were the nurture and rearing of infancy dependent exclusively upon men, I think the race would soon die out from their neglect, or from such clumsiness as would be

hardly less fatal than neglect,” Mann mused. (27). Third, Mann believed that well-cultured women were healthier and bred better children, and that improved education would sensitize women to “the physiological duties she owes the race” (107). Putting the matter as categorically and emphatically as he was able, Mann declared, “*No man, strong in head and strong in limb, ever was, or ever can be, born of a feeble maternal ancestry*” (110, emphasis in original).

Armed with the mental and moral culture that formal education provides, women could fulfill their physiological duty to protect the race from deterioration, and over time, hereditary disability and racial inferiority would be wiped from the earth, and the “pigmy species who now threaten to reduce the robust Anglo-Saxon manhood to the stature of the Aztec children, would disappear” (H. Mann, *A Few Thoughts...Woman* 112). “Pigmy species,” “Anglo-Saxon manhood,” “Aztec children”—note how Mann’s imagination for human progress is bounded by an implicit equation of whiteness with both a racial norm and ideal. It is the “Anglo-Saxon” racial body that Mann takes as his emblem for human progress, and it is this “manly” body that must be preserved against contamination or degeneration. In Mann’s mind, the inclusion of women in higher education was licensed by this eliminative, race-purifying potential. The work of educating women is deemed worthwhile when it yields that most valuable of human products, the progressive white male body. In the college classroom, it was believed that this race-hygienic sexual reproduction could be supported through co-educational writing assessment, which structured morally desirable relationships between the men and women in class—relationships underwritten by virtuous sexual restraint and underwriting the virtue of sexual criticality. We turn to these relationships next.

### **“Some Contagion Will Spread”: The Erotics of Peer Writing Assessment**

Mann considered it a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good education, must be in want of a wife. And, for that matter, a similarly-fitted single woman must be in want of a husband. Antioch College to the rescue. If Antioch could not help its young charges to find mates, it could at least train students to inwardly read those around them for their racial health and worth—preparing them in the habits of mind necessary to avoid unhappy or eugenically disastrous matches. The fourth and final race-writing benefit to the education of women was one specific to co-education: Eugenic uplift of women *and* men through a kind of sexual pedagogy, preparing them to be more morally controlled and judicious in matters of reproduction. A more desirable form of sexual selection would involve women and men screening their potential mates for inner moral and mental development, breeding only with those possessed of good breeding. Antioch’s writing assessment ecology provided opportunities for cultivating this kind of sexual scrutiny and selectivity.

Co-education at Antioch was coordinated to condition its young men and women to manage their sexual appetites, with the college’s faculty monitoring mixed student companies at virtually all times, and tightly regulating where, when, and how the sexes could have contact (see Rury and Harper). In one of his earliest speeches as Antioch President, Mann insisted that Antioch’s system of surveillance made the co-education morally possible and palatable, putting at ease those scandalized by the sexual intermingling of student bodies in the classroom: “Our general plan is, association of the sexes *under supervision*; non-association, without it” (*Demands*, 14 emphasis in original). If men and women were to restrain their reproductive powers (quantitative racial hygiene) and to pick eugenically viable mates (qualitative racial hygiene), it was incumbent on schools like Antioch to train their mental and moral faculties

accordingly. Rhetoric and composition at Antioch were essential components of this process, providing structured and contained opportunities of social intercourse between the sexes—and, through peer assessment, opportunities for the sexes to improve and correct one another.

It was hoped that the regulation of social intercourse at Antioch could, in turn, regulate sexual intercourse in after-life—foiling Malthus’s predictions about over-population, and closing off opportunities for the unfit to procreate. Mann states his intentions plainly enough in his

*Dedication Address* for the college:

It is more than desirable that a certain degree of social intercourse should subsist between those who have ceased to be children, but are not yet men and women. Without such intercourse, the manners grow rude and awkward, the sentiments grow coarse and impure. . . . In education, the problem is, to facilitate this appropriate degree of intercourse while avoiding all *dangerous* or *indecorous familiarity*. (*Dedication* 120, emphasis mine)

Sexual propriety was as much a part of the Antioch curriculum as any subject formally taught.

Faculty-orchestrated interactions between Antioch’s young men and women—“daily and thrice daily meetings of the sexes, with occasional interviews in social circles”—were expected to improve educational development by encouraging “both moral restraint and intellectual excitement” (124; see also Tomlinson 295). Sexual tension and the natural affections Mann believed each sex had for the other could be leveraged to cultivate students more deeply and fully than would otherwise be possible. Men wanted to impress women, and vice versa. Here was a motivational strategy that, unlike fear or emulation, conferred proper mental exercise to all students in common. Heterosexual passion was “an agency which God meant we should make use of to promote the refinement, the progress and the elevation of [men and women] both,” Mann cheered, predicting that co-education with the opposite sex would eventually become the dominant race-writing means for motivating male students: “I believe it may be made to supersede many of our present coarse and crude instruments of discipline,—the goads and

bludgeons of punishment which are now employed to rouse young men from the stupefaction of idleness, or beat them back from the gateways of sin” (124-5).

In the course of sponsoring its students’ intellectual and moral development, Antioch sought to promote good *breeding* in the most literal sense possible. Too often, sexual reproduction resulted in the generation of too many lives of too little quality. Racial progress was sacrificed whenever someone procreates with a wealthy but physically unfit partner, or when—out of physiological ignorance and social inexperience—young people consummate their appetites with a sexually available but mentally underdeveloped mate. Mann considered co-education a means of training young men and women to identify suitable sexual partners, facilitating a kind of selective breeding that would cure the “epidemic of incongruous matches which now afflicts society” (*Dedication* 120). Men and women had too few opportunities for the kinds of interaction that would provide insights into their inner character and abilities. In the city, sexual contact zones of polite society were limited to spaces like “the fashionable dinner party, the assembly, or the ball-room” that had all the intimacy of a child’s “doll-shop”—spaces that were sham “theaters for a kind of public display” that occulted, rather than revealed, the “natural dispositions or . . . cultivated adaptations” of potential mates (121). What was needed was a more revealing theater for displaying the racial health of potential mates—a theater for inwardly reading their natures and developmental potentials.

Outside of the city, the prospects for successful sexual selection were at least as bleak. Relationships may be closer, more intimate and more revealing, but sexual options are more limited. “They are like customers at a meagre market, who buy what they do not want, through lack of finding what they need,” Mann icily puts it (*Dedication* 122). All the inward reading in the world did little good if one is forced to pore exclusively over inferior social bodies—the



human surfaces of which were texts poorly written, thin on natural capacity and unmarked by corrective pedagogical inscriptions. City-life provided too few opportunities for *screening* racial health; rural-life, so few options that *screening out* inferior choices came at a steep reproductive cost. Sexual selectivity required regular, semi-structured contact between the sexes, in spaces where the human stock was of high quality—perhaps even screened already for their racial health. Antioch was to provide such a space, and its system of sexual selection was activated, in no small part, through writing instruction and assessment.

“For the exercise and manifestation of mental capacities and attainments, there is no reception-room like the recitation room,” Mann quipped (*Dedication* 122-3). Students were required to write and recite throughout the course of Antioch’s curriculum both because these activities conferred mental discipline, and because doing so ensured students would continually be externalizing their inner thoughts and attainments for appraisal by the opposite sex. Every college composition, a text suitable for inwardly reading its author’s character; every assessment of writing, an examination of breeding—and of breeding potential. At first, this erotics of assessment was not uniformly embraced by all members of Antioch’s faculty.<sup>97</sup> Antioch’s first Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, William Doherty, seems to have considered peer writing assessment to be such an intimate form of intercourse between the sexes that it bordered on indecency and, initially, he was resistant to allowing it. When Ada Shepard entered Doherty’s rhetoric and writing course, she discovered “his custom with regard to composition is to have us exchange [compositions] with each other, after reading them, and write criticisms on them. He always has girls exchange with girls, and gentlemen with gentlemen, so that, in our class, Mrs. Jay and I always have each other, which does not give us the benefit of a variety of critics, which the gentlemen have” (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 7 Oct. 1854).

Shepard worried she was receiving inferior mental exercise at Antioch on account of Doherty's prudish scheme, which unfairly deprived her of the opportunity to receive correction from as many of her peers as possible. Assessment and the mental correction it enabled were things she cherished. Indeed, Shepard's favorite feature of her favorite Professor, C. S. Pennell—Rebecca Pennell's brother and Mann's nephew, who taught classical languages—was his ability to root out mental errors as painlessly as possible: "He does not let me rest in my blunders, but shows them to me at once, and then he is as pleasant and kind as possible" (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 15 Sept. 1854). Doherty had other concerns. Co-education was one thing, and classroom banter and conversation between the sexes—when monitored by a professorial custodian—was harmless enough. On the other hand, peer writing assessment prompted—indeed, relied on—intimate exposures and a degree of social contact that Doherty apparently regarded too risqué. An exasperated Shepard located Doherty's objections somewhere between puritanical folly and a hygienic concern over sexually-transmitted moral disease: "I don't know and can't conceive what his motives are—possibly he thinks some *contagion* will spread between the girls and boys, if they touch each others' papers" (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 7 Oct. 1854). Shepard resolved to confront him over this practice, and while no record of the exchange has survived, we know from extant theme criticisms that peer writing assessment between the sexes was common across the curriculum by the end of Ada's first year at Antioch. Of the 32 theme criticisms preserved by the Jays—written in neat hand on small slips of paper or scrawled in the bottom margins of written assignments—precisely *half* were written by opposite sex schoolmates. What's more, Eli and Mahalah Jay appear never to have been assigned to assess one another's writing.

Doherty and Mann may have had different notions of propriety where peer writing assessment was concerned, but on the fundamental question of its erotic potential, they were very much on the same page. Doherty and Mann premised their policies on an understanding of assessment as sexually significant contact—so while Doherty’s initial Victorian push-back against opposite-sex peer writing assessment may strike us as strange and objectionable, its underlying assumptions do not stray far from Mann’s. (Additionally, neither man seems to have imagined an erotic potential for theme criticisms exchanged between same sex peers.) No “doll-shop” or “meagre market,” the sexual contact zone of the Antioch recitation room was believed to be intimate and richly stocked: “a well-filled school assembles together a great variety of character; and a class-room, where the sexes recite in presence of each other, daily and for years, affords opportunities for a kind of acquaintance, infinitely superior to any that can ever be enjoyed, at Washington, at watering-places, or other matrimonial bazaars” (H. Mann, *Dedication* 122). Mann turned moralizing concerns over the impropriety of co-education on their heads. Social intimacy between the sexes in college was desirable not *in spite of* the possibility for reproductive sexual entanglements, but *because of* that possibility. What better space for auditioning suitable mates than the writing classroom? The writing classroom was, in Mann’s mind, not just a sexual contact zone, but a sexual market and proving ground. There, students are subjected to “daily observation” of their capacities and habits of mind, exposing imperfections in character so that they can be corrected *prior* to wedlock: “Dispositions will here be subjected to the severest trials; and unworthy passions, though hidden beneath the last folds of the heart, will be roused to a shameful exposure by excitement, or stifled into extinction by the divine discipline of conscience” (123).

Having conducted much of his courtship of Mary Peabody through letter-writing (see Marshall), Mann knew all too well how romance could be a textually-mediated affair—so there may have been some sense in which peer writing assessment helped induct Antioch’s students into the realm of polite, written conversation between the sexes. Certainly, Mann had proclaimed publicly enough that (professor-supervised) social intercourse of women with men could improve the manners and sentiments of both, habituate them to sexual restraint, and train them to inwardly read each other for reproductive fitness. Yet we would be wrong to assume that theme criticisms at Antioch penned by students were invariably intended by them as romantic overtures. With our only surviving sets of Antioch student compositions and peer assessments centered on the wife-and-husband Jay couple, surviving theme criticisms took on no more than a polite, restrained cast—more courtly than courting. The men commenting on Mahalah’s papers, for instance, occasionally layered their peer criticisms with (comparatively) effusive asides about her authorial qualities—as though rehearsing a kind of distant sentimentality they hoped would serve them well in their romantic lives after Antioch. These studiously “chaste” writings (as Weston might say) represent the most overtly sentimental and explicitly personal of the theme criticisms the archive makes available to us. In them, we find examples of this often subdued and dry genre of social exchange that are injected with brief, vivid, admiring remarks, characterizing Mahalah herself. Here, critical commentary on the textual body shades into commentary on her authorial body.

The brief May 7, 1856 criticism left by Frank S. Curtis on one of Mahalah’s written logic exercises is devoid of virtually all critical content, save for a connection he makes between Mahalah’s personal quality and the quality of her composition. “The critic finds no errors in the paper of Mrs. Jay. ’Tis finely executed and *well worthy of its author*,” Curtis writes (Criticism, 7

May 1856). In doing so, he comes nearly as close as decency allows to identifying Mahalah (that is, “Mrs. Jay”) herself as a finely executed specimen of humanity—a human body befitting the error-free textual body he was tasked with scrutinizing. Similarly, when Roswell Horr writes to Mahalah that her “essay is free from mistakes, so far as the feeble powers of the critic are able to determine,” he follows this comment with a more vague, sweeping, and sentimental stylistic criticism (Untitled Criticism, 1856-1857?). Horr continues: “He does not think there is that *perfection of beauty* in the arrangement of all the sentences that *usually characterize* the productions of its author” (Untitled Criticism, 1856-1857?). Not exactly bodice-ripping material, but then again, chaste sentimentality seems to have been both the intended medium and message of co-educational peer criticism. In these commentaries—devoid, as they are, of risqué content—we get a glimpse of the kind of sentimental admiration Mann hoped that co-education would spark and fan in the breasts of Antioch’s students. When Mahalah comes into view, her attractive qualities are refracted through her elegant, error-free prose. Inwardly read in this way, textual bodies become sites where human beauty, worth, and perfection are detected and remarked upon. In a world nearly lost to carnality, overrun with newly spawning moral and mental degenerates, the exchange of compositions trained students in appraising a second, more revealing (and, Mann hoped, more desirable) skin.

Of course, these criticisms would not have been the only space students could have exchanged romantic pleasantries, were they inclined to do so. Moreover, students were disallowed from consummating the passions aroused through classroom recitation and assessment “until after the college life is completed,” on pain of “forfeiting all connection with the college itself”—a penalty Mann commuted in those rare cases where students, like Eli and Mahalah Jay, entered Antioch already married. Some students at Antioch would, in fact, go on to

wed their classmates—as did Ada Shepard and Henry Clay Badger from the college’s first class, who married in 1859, two years after graduation. Others, like Adelaide Churchill, would exchange vows with a member of Antioch’s faculty—in Churchill’s case, Austin Craig, whose one-year stint as Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres coincided with Churchill’s senior year (1857-1858). But Mann believed co-education deeply beneficial even to those students who left Antioch without identifying a suitable partner for regenerating the race; Antioch’s writing assessment ecology was a space uncommonly “favorable for the inculcation and growth of those sentiments which adorn and ennoble both sexes” (*Dedication* 119).

Co-educational writing instruction and assessment were believed to afford a special kind of sexual pedagogy, inscribing in students’ minds habits conducive to attracting and selecting mates—that is, exciting students to exercise their faculties more deeply and developing in their inward eye for reading the opposite sex. Close academic intercourse through a “united education,” as Mann sometimes called it, provided precisely the kind of moral culture that sexually segregated or exclusionary schools denied its students: the “apprenticeship to propriety and habitual self-restraint” that accompanies polite social intercourse between the sexes (*Demands* 13). Through this erotics of writing assessment—with its hands-off training in sexual virtue and hands-on engagement in reproductive criticality—Mann dreamed the composition classroom could inscribe the precepts of better breeding within the student body. Race-writing through sexual examination.

Population control was, as he imagined it, merely one more virtuous outcome of judicious peer assessment.

## CHAPTER 7

### Conclusion:

#### “Some Victory for Mankind”

Just weeks before his death, Mann delivered his Baccalaureate Address for Antioch College’s graduating class of 1859, seeking to imprint in his students’ minds one final lesson—a summation of sorts, for all they had learned in the preceding years of cultural pedagogy at the school. He reminded his students that habits biologically compose them, and “that all our faculties grow in power and in skill by use, and that they dwarf in both by non-use” (“Baccalaureate ... 1859” 518). No less than the future of humanity depends on the race-writing endeavors of each new generation, soldiers in a great and invisible moral war. “Nothing to-day prevents this earth from being a paradise but error and sin. These errors, these sins, you must assail. ... [T]hese are the hosts against which a war of extermination is to be waged, and you are to be the warriors,” he instructed (523-4). His closing message was one about moral self-assessment, about judging the merits of one’s efforts to compose progress: “I beseech you to treasure up in your hearts these my parting words: *Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity*” (524, emphasis in original).

Mann’s parting moral injunction is well-known; its relationship to his assessment-related reforms, less so—until now. This dissertation provides a new beginning for writing assessment history by recovering the phrenological ecology of assumptions and aims at work in Mann’s antebellum assessment-rhetorics—a moral infrastructure in which distinctions between social

justice and eugenic social engineering are erased. It is partly by means of writing assessment that he sought to win victories for humanity: Through writing assessment, it became possible to monitor and manage the campaign against race-degrading error and sin, holding educators accountable for the developmental inscriptions they made in their students. When inwardly read, student writings could be used to compare the errors scoring students of different races, and to marshal public sentiment in the service of fairer race-writing outcomes. English-language entrance examinations in writing offered new ways to screen and certify student worth, as well as arbitrate controversies about inclusion—the second skin of the page, providing a new racial standard for determining which student bodies were developmentally fit to participate in Antioch’s experimental assessment ecology. And once admitted to Antioch’s writing classrooms, students received and provided theme criticisms that cultivated progressive virtues in the student body, equipping it with the writerly habits needed to wage an exterminative war against moral idiocy. In this conflict for the fate of the new race of Americans, assessment was to provide a eugenic whetstone of sorts, sharpening the mind’s faculties and the writer’s inky tongue—a moral means of ensuring the pen became mightier than the sword.

Bearing in mind the multiple, overlapping ways in which writing assessment advanced Mann’s moral mission, it is perhaps fitting that his parting words are sometimes misquoted by those who find in them a life-lesson: “Be ashamed to die until you have *scored* some victory for humanity” (see Orwig, emphasis mine). Aided in his work by writing assessment, Mann could go to his grave unashamed: He made his mark in the minds of Antioch’s students, scoring a victory for humanity’s future. This was, at least, the interpretation of Mann’s last years and his legacy favored by Henry Clay Badger, who graduated as a member of Antioch’s first graduating class of 1857, before serving under Mann as its third Professor of Rhetoric, Logic and Belles



Lettres. In an 1858 letter published in *The Christian Palladium*, Badger described his (then, still-living) mentor's mission as one of cultural progress and reproduction, made possible through pedagogical inscription. According to Badger, Mann "sought to embody in a young and vigorous institution"—that is, Antioch—"those principles to the advocacy of which he had devoted his life. He saw that the good of the race demanded that those principles should be proclaimed, and not only proclaimed, but put into practice" ("Letter" 386).

In preparing and examining the next generation of race-writers, Mann could leave the world better than he found it. Indeed, by inscribing his values and habits into the student body, he did not really leave the world at all: "He felt that his pen must soon be still, his tongue soon silent in death. And he knew that if he could *graft those life-shaping ideas into some new stock* and leave behind him an institution which should embody and express them—he should secure to himself an immortality of action on earth" (Badger, "Letter" 386, emphasis mine). Were we to think about Mann's legacy as Badger did—grafted not only into student bodies, but into structures for improving those bodies—we might scrutinize the present writing education scene and find Mann's signature still legible in our assessment methods and aims. Writing assessment remains an indispensable instrument for actualizing writing education's social justice ends, while at the same time defining and delimiting what social justice *means*, and bounding who benefits from its realization. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the assessments we put in place say something about the world we want to save—about the victory we hope to win for humanity. Bob Broad encourages writing educators and writing program administrators to consider "what we really value"—and to assess students accordingly. Extending this idea, Keith Harms has recently challenged the field of writing assessment to consider its pasts and the ways they have shaped what we value: "We need to think...beyond notions of assessment that rely on

predetermined language standards, or upon validity models that ask what we value, but fail to ask if we *should* value those things” (131, emphasis in original). I argue that when writing educators and writing program administrators contemplate what they value, this inquiry should prompt us to also ask other, more explicitly assessment-rhetorical questions: *Who do we really value? How do our assessment-rhetorics value the student body? And should we continue to participate in them?* These are questions that social justice-oriented historiography empowers us to ask—provided we are willing to do so.

Below, I explore how traces from this seemingly distant phase in the assessment past remain legible in the field of writing assessment’s present—a history we must reckon with and learn from, or else continue to reinscribe whenever we appraise student writing. Placing Mann’s assessment innovations alongside one another, I first explore the overlapping, contradictory commitments they advance, discussing how each assessment-rhetoric bundles technical, ethical, and eugenic purposes for assessing writing. I follow this section by discussing how consideration of antebellum assessment-rhetoric can guide present-day writing educators—whether instructors or administrators—in questioning the assessment-rhetorics their own practices participate in.

Writing assessment is the part of writing education that most centrally and complexly engages with the student body: reading it, forming it, valuing it, constraining it. In telling the story of the assessment past, Writing Studies can better understand how the work of the writing classroom relates to broader cultural anxieties and aims related to bodies, with classroom composition imagined as a means of intervening in social composition. Such insights will remain relevant to Writing Studies for as long as its members remain committed to the project of composing progress in and through the composition classroom—authoring into existence some victory for humanity. This conclusion, then, is its own kind of beginning.

## **Displaying, Comparing, Screening, Relating: Antebellum Assessment-Rhetorics in Review**

Each antebellum assessment innovation sponsored by Mann and his colleagues between 1845 and 1859 represents a different rhetorical engagement with student bodies—a means of framing and forming them, in order to improve them and thereby save the world. Save the world, in Mann’s mind, from social disorder and racial degeneration; save student bodies from the selves they are capable of becoming. Mann explicitly thought of his education reform work as a moral enterprise, advocating the cause of justice by intervening in the composition of society. Education mattered to him because it provided an instrument for reorganizing the inner constitution of student populations, thereby—in a few generations’ time—reorganizing the mental, moral, and physical hygiene of American population at large. Assessing bodies of writing was, as he and his phrenological circle understood it, a means of assessing the racial bodies of writers.

In considering the antebellum assessment-rhetorics at work in these early approaches to appraising bodies, present-day writing educators gain access to a set of microhistorical cases for thinking through the different ways that assessment *articulates* the body, in both senses of that word: making claims about the body, while also connecting it to broader ethical and eugenic initiatives. Below, I review each of these innovations with a focus on their multiple, seemingly contradictory purposes: technical purposes for practical intervention in schools, ethical purposes for intervening in the moral fabric of society, and eugenic purposes for intervening in the racial substance of the population. Mann’s phrenological assumptions and aims may no longer have currency in writing education, but the assessment-rhetorical engagements with the body piloted under his watch remain very much with us, as do their underlying moral mission. Like Mann, we

still seek to compose progress in the writing classroom. In antebellum writing assessment, we see the complexities and contradictions that can vex this work.

**Displaying the Body:** In addition to popularizing writing as a medium for assessment, the 1845 written examination configured writing on the page as a body of errors. With Mann's backing, the formal school examiners—and Mann's friend Samuel Gridley Howe, in particular—sought to quantify and classify student errors, before tabulating and reporting them for public consumption. This assessment-rhetorical engagement *displays* the body, tendentiously recreating it for an audience whose sentiments the assessor seeks to sway. Importantly, the technical feat of displaying the student body required a number of decisions—each, its own rhetorical intervention of sorts. First, the examiners determined what counted as an error in the abstract, decided on criteria for different kinds of error, and identified whether each student response matched those criteria. Remaking student responses into a series of aggregable tallies, the examiners then arranged their findings into a multimodal representation of student error, apparently taking inspiration from phrenological charts and other tabular displays with which Howe and Mann were intimately familiar. Finally, Howe and Mann generated text—first in Howe's Grammar School report, then in Mann's "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools" recirculation of it—to narrate for readers how they should *interpret* and *feel* about the errors counted during the 1845 examinations. The technical purpose of displaying the student body was underwritten by assumptions about the bodies being displayed, as well as the audience the display was intended to inform.

The effort to inform this audience—the Bostonian public—was motivated by an ethnical purpose for displaying the student body: reforming Boston's schools, so that they better formed that body. Error, for the school reformers, was not merely a technical property of writing; it had

worrying developmental implications and risked deforming the new race of American children, as Mann thought of them. The city's public school teachers were doing an injustice to the students they were charged with cultivating and were, by extension, doing violence to the nation's future citizenry. Specifically, the reformers feared that Boston's school masters were overly reliant on physical violence in the classroom—whipping students into compliance—and on the social violence of fostering competition between students, which meant that only some students could emerge successful, leaving the rest of the class demoralized. Mann and Howe interpreted errors on the page as being caused by these pedagogical violences and reported as much to the public. The technical purpose of displaying the student body was, therefore, articulated to an ethical purpose for writing assessment: Accountability. In counting the student body's errors by making these inner, invisible errors publicly visible on the printed page, the machinery of written examination was mobilized to make the masters governing Boston's common schools accountable for their pedagogical failures, while creating new incentives and pressures for changes in classroom pedagogy. As Massachusetts' Secretary of Education, Mann had the prominence and platform necessary to call for reforms. For their parts, his reformer colleagues on Boston's School Examining Committees were formally authorized to audit and report on student performance. But these actors had no direct power over curriculum and pedagogy in Boston's common schools. Writing assessment was their rhetorical means for shaping public sentiment and advocating for reforms they could not demand by administrative fiat. The technical innovation provided an ethical vehicle for intervention.

Yet this assessment-rhetoric of display and accountability advanced a third purpose, a eugenic aim that coursed through the innovation's technical and ethical dimensions. Mental errors mattered to Mann and his colleagues because—in the phrenological framework brought to

their early examinations—these errors were believed to have biological significance and racial stakes. Each error on the page testified to a failure in mental exercise and development; an error-filled page doubled as a portrait of a mind with low intelligence and diminished capacity. As students of the phrenologist George Combe, Mann and Howe believed that proper mental exercise corresponded to racial health and progress, with future generations capable of inheriting the race’s past developmental history. What’s more, they thought of “English” as a language of scientific and civilizational progress; command of the English mother tongue spurred mental development and racial hygiene. Phrenological assumptions like these underpinned Mann’s anxieties about the health of American democracy. True, Mann expressed genuine worry that under-preparation in the classroom meant that the American citizenry might not be equipped to preserve the nation, much less realize its full democratic potential. But this fear about development doubled, for him, as a fear about racial degeneracy: Failures in education caused disability and mental decline, he thought, unfitting the coming American race for self-governance. Beating students and making them compete were undesirable, to be sure—but the underlying reason Mann and Howe held them to be undesirable was a eugenic one. Not only did these motivational strategies not stimulate eugenic mental growth, they might also stunt or distort mental development, leading to dysgenic racial decline. In the course of advancing new technical means for score reporting and making possible ethical claims about the need for improved, non-violent instruction, this assessment-rhetoric of display nevertheless also reinforced eugenic narratives about the body’s development and worth. *Any display of the body sends messages about what the body is and what it should be.*

**Comparing the Body:** As part of this broader rhetorical effort to display the student body, Mann and his reformer colleagues introduced a second innovation, nested in the first: Data

disaggregation by race. Powered by the sociotechnical machinery of the 1845 written examinations, this second assessment-rhetoric sought to *compare* student bodies—specifically, the black and white student bodies sorted into separate schools by Boston’s segregationist public school system. The same general technical procedures involved in quantifying and reporting student error provided the basis for this second rhetorical framing of the student body, but when it came to comparing school performance, the examiners introduced a new interpretative layer to their work. The Abiel Smith School was the city’s only common school that served its black student population; the reformers interpreted data from this school along the grain of their racialized assumptions about the black body—its essential inclinations, capacities, and racial differences from the white body. When examining the Smith student body, Howe and his colleagues seem to have administered additional, race-specific questions to the student writers—questions believed by the reformers to be more interesting to the Smith scholars and therefore easier for them to answer. (No additional questions seem to have been asked of Boston’s white students.) This attempt at culturally-responsive assessment relied on and reinforced the committee’s beliefs about what the black body could (or should) know and be able to do. In their formal report, the Examining Committee composed school specific sub-reports for each school examined; their report for the Smith School was several times longer than any other report, describing the students’ failings relative to their imagined racial character. When it came time for Mann to reprint the Grammar School Committee’s report, the sub-report for the Smith School was the only sub-report Mann included.

The addition of what were imagined to be culturally-relevant questions and the introduction of explicitly racialized data analysis were, Mann and his colleagues believed, important technical instruments for advancing an ethical end: Fairness. Comparing student

bodies in segregated antebellum Boston was intended to ensure that the city's black population was receiving an education of comparable quality to the city's white population. Of particular interest to Mann and Howe was the potential to remove and replace the Smith School's white school master, Abner Forbes, in whom all of the pedagogical failings that plagued Boston's common schools seemed to be intensified. Forbes, it was charged, dangerously over-relied on corporal punishment as a means of motivating his students and also disbelieved in the potential for black student development. Comparing the Smith student body with the city's other (white) bodies provided Mann and Howe a technical vehicle for pressuring Forbes out of his position.

Crucially, though, reforming the Smith School by replacing Forbes was not the same as abolishing the school itself, and neither Mann nor Howe publicly advocated an end to segregated schooling. Their efforts to advance fairness in the city's schools were shaped and limited by racist assumptions about the fundamental separateness of black and white student bodies, as well as eugenic beliefs about the developmental benefits segregation offered to black students. Mann, for one, held that social separation was useful—perhaps even necessary—for providing a space where black bodies could compete against white ones, in part because he believed that the white race possessed superior intelligence. The ecology of phrenological assumptions endorsed by Mann and Howe led them to think that, with proper education, the black racial body could be constitutionally rewritten and improved so that it was no longer (as both believed) innately inferior. Additionally, both endorsed, as a public policy aim, the idea that black bodies should be relocated to a colony of their own outside of the United States—this relocation, being necessary for developmental uplift. Separateness, it was thought, made equality possible: Even as it advocated a fairer, less violent writing education for Boston's black population, the 1845 assessment-rhetoric of bodily comparison reinscribed racist narratives about black inferiority and



authorized continued school segregation. *The act of comparing bodies underwrites, and is underwritten by, claims about the nature of difference—and about which differences are natural.*

**Screening the Body:** At Mann’s experimental writing assessment ecology in Yellow Springs, the broad technical focus of assessment shifted. The 1845 written examinations had attempted to frame and form the collective student body, in large part as a means of intervening in and reforming the schools responsible for developing that body. At Antioch College, Mann and his colleagues on the faculty had broad curricular authority and could put in place pedagogical practices they believed conducive to racial cultivation. With local control came a focus on the individual student body. Applicants to Antioch and its preparatory school were expected to have surpassed the “common” level of development that had been the goal of the 1845 common school writing assessments. Antioch’s requirement of a written English-language examination for entrance and placement supplied the school with an assessment-rhetorical instrument for *screening* the student body—gauging readiness for inclusion and screening out those who failed to meet the school’s standards. This approach to framing the student body involved confronting applicants with a multi-day battery of subject-specific written tests (the first of which was an English Grammar writing assessment), before marking answers to these questions for their correctness and certifying student placement accordingly. Out of hundreds of applicants, fewer than 10 met Antioch’s rigorous standards and were admitted to the college.

Yet for its apparent successes in keeping students out of Antioch College, written examination was intended also as a justice-oriented means of permitting new student bodies to enter. Antioch fashioned itself as the first fully co-educational college of its kind and was racially integrated, admitting women and students of color at a time when vanishingly few institutions designed by-and-for white male bodies did so. Positioning its written entrance examinations as

an objective judge of mental development—so rigorous that any student who passed could be certified as phrenologically fit for college education—Antioch promoted an ethical aim: *Inclusion*. This remarkable embrace of inclusivity was not, however, a total break with eugenic fantasies of racial progress. Inclusion by meritocratic writing assessment provided a new means of reading and screening student bodies for their racial value. Mann never abandoned his assumption that, in general, women and black people were intellectually inferior to white men. But at the same time, he believed that individual members of a population could prove themselves extraordinary and that white male bodies could be found inferior to these exceptional racial bodies. In the way it was interpreted, then, the technical battery of entrance examinations introduced a means of meritocratic inclusion, but this battery of assessments doubled as a phrenological test of humanity—an ostensibly objective way to appraise individual racial development and worth. While Antioch and its preparatory school embraced new student bodies, its assessment-rhetorical approach to doing so left in place eugenic logics that indexed racial value to written performance. *Standards for including bodies tell the story of how the body's worth is contingent.*

**Relating the Body:** Finally, for those bodies deemed developed enough to attend Antioch, classroom writing assessment provided an assessment-rhetorical apparatus for structuring how students related to course content and how they related to one another. Antioch practiced an early form of writing across the curriculum, with success in virtually every course evaluated on the basis of student writing—most often, essays penned in response to course-specific questions or themes. Assessment of these writings came in the form of two, overlapping sets of criticism: Brief instructor criticisms, written in the margins of student papers, and longer peer criticism letters, written on separate slips of paper. As among the first fully co-educational

writing ecologies in the United States, Antioch seems to have been the first postsecondary space to sponsor co-educational peer writing assessment—much less co-educational peer assessment across the curriculum. And while instructor remarks were confined to short evaluative statements about the overall quality of the paper being assessed, peer criticism letters included commentary on mechanical errors, on the psychology and organization of the text in question, and on the moral sentiments expressed therein.

Assessment at Antioch was intended to serve its broader goal for writing education: *Virtue*. As early as Antioch's opening, Mann could be found publicly proclaiming that the college's first goal and most enduring legacy would be the moral development of its students. The virtuous pursuits of improvement and self-regulation were moral attributes foundational to this mission. Consistent with Antioch's ethical purpose, the themes assigned to students regularly required contemplation of an imagined moral leader or controversy, and instructor criticism fixated on whether the moral sense of student writing was adequately expressed and identified when papers gave evidence of improvement. In this vein, peer criticisms reflected on the moral content of student writing, remarked on mistakes made on the page, and provided guidance for improvement—but they also did something more. In positioning student writers as critics, peer assessment aided its peer critics in cultivating virtuous habits of criticality. Peer assessment taught the student-critic to read her peers through their writings, to fixate on and identify errors in need of fixing, and to find the moral character nestled between the black-and-white characters on the page. Antioch's writing assessment ecology, therefore, provided four interconnected avenues for inculcating virtue: across the curriculum, students wrote about virtue; instructor criticism drew out the virtues evidenced in the quality of their writing; peers more explicitly did

the same, in greater detail; and as peer critics themselves, students were trained to find and comment on their classmates' writerly virtues.

For Mann, even virtue was not innocent of eugenic importance. Antioch's investment in moral education was something he hoped would pay dividends in student racial development in two closely related ways. The first was that explicit moral development prevented students from degenerating into a state he called "moral idiocy," where physical health and intellectual power were jeopardized by improper habits and sentimental attachments. Moral idiocy, he feared, could lead even the highly intelligent to abuse their own bodies through mind-altering vices like alcohol and tobacco. What was worse, the highly intelligent could—without the restraints imposed by moral education—weaponize their brilliance to exploit others, deepen social injustice, and jeopardize collective racial hygiene. Mann discussed the importance of moral character against this backdrop of assumptions about moral degeneracy. What better way to exterminate moral idiocy than to inculcate a virtuous passion for progress and self-restraint in the student body?

Virtue's second race-writing benefit was imagined to accompany the work of co-educational peer assessment, which—by structuring social intercourse between the sexes—was supposed to supply a system for eugenic population control. Mann theorized that the Malthusian potential for overpopulation resulted from the absence of twin sexual virtues: sexual restraint and sexual criticality. Without these virtues, men and women reproduced too often and bred with biologically inferior mates, reproducing frailty, disability, and idiocy in the popular body. In allowing men and women to occupy the same writing classrooms and providing them controlled opportunities to scrutinize one another, Antioch's writing assessment ecology sought to augment the sexual virtue of the student body. Each peer criticism provided an opportunity for chaste

intercourse between the sexes—as well as a chance for men and women to inspect the textual bodies of their peers for mental and moral hygiene. Within Mann’s phrenological cosmology, the recitation room at Antioch could be thought of as a space for preparing the student body for eugenic sexual encounters, containing population quantity through enhanced restraint, while increasing population quality through improved criticality. The technical innovation and ethical potential of classroom assessment at Antioch cohabited with eugenic assumptions about moral cultivation and social intercourse between the sexes. Student-centered assessment across the curriculum, which provided an outsized role for peer-led assessment, provided also a vector for fantasies of population control. *To structure how bodies relate is to argue for the connections and communities that are desirable to form—and those that aren’t.*

Displaying through error tabulation. Comparing through data disaggregation. Screening through entrance examination. Relating through co-educational peer criticism. Each assessment-rhetorical engagement with the body represents, at once, a technical innovation with imagined moral stakes, fraught with eugenic dangers. To understand the logic at work in Mann’s attempt to compose progress through writing assessment—to understand how his social justice interventions were complicated, even compromised their underlying assumptions—is to understand how ostensibly technical feats of assessment gain social meanings and consequences through their participation in broader cultural logics and projects. However much writing assessment practice has changed, it remains true that assessment never occurs in a rhetorical vacuum. We have need of the kind of understandings this antebellum history makes available to us.

Of course, few in the field of writing assessment today would confess themselves to be practicing phrenologists, and likely all would find the idea that composition constitutionally re-

writes the body and mind to be preposterous. It would be all too easy to dismiss the antebellum history of writing assessment as a past that the field has entirely moved beyond, and thereby distance the present work of writing assessment from the moral horror of Mann's race-writing social justice advocacy. Yet in matters of social justice, Horace Mann is in several respects our contemporary. As virtually any education textbook will readily inform readers, Mann devoted much of his adult life to the expansion, improvement, and availability of public education in the United States, in pursuit of what he considered to be the public good. He advocated free education for the poor, fair education for African Americans, and equal education for women at a time when all three of these populations were routinely shut out from the opportunities afforded to their wealthier, whiter, male counterparts. Over a hundred years before E. D. Hirsch, Jr. could be heard calling for schools to manufacture a shared "cultural literacy" that would aid in "the making of Americans" (see *Cultural* and *Making*), Mann sought through common schooling to provide students access to what he understood to be the language of social power and cultural currency—what Lisa Delpit has called "the language of economic success" (68)—as well as the habits of mind necessary to survive and thrive in society.

Above all, he sought to secure better lives for the country's children, and to help those children become better people through the education they received. Writing instruction and assessment provided the tools for composing each of these reforms. Tools, too, for (re)composing and (re)forming the student body itself. His assumptions about this body—about the populations he sought to support—reinscribed injustice even as he was working to improve students' lives and their access to opportunity. Indeed, through an archival excavation of the assumptions and aims at work in these reforms, we learn that every aspect of Mann's agenda—then, the United States' most ambitious attempt to promote social justice in and through

education—was shaped and limited by biases about innate human inequality, and by eugenic beliefs about human development. We must take care not to learn the wrong lesson from historical re-examination of Mann’s social justice assessment-rhetorics: Such a discovery should not lull us into a comforting sense of our own moral superiority. It should sober us with a reminder that social justice is what we make it—a reminder that if Mann’s famed pursuit of progress was nested with an ecology of hidden violences, ours may be as well. This dissertation’s new beginning for writing assessment history does not answer the question of who we should be, moving forward—it warns us who we might become, if we fail to examine our assumptions and aims as critically as we do our methods and practices. In the remaining sections of this conclusion, I sketch and discuss some forms that self-examination of this kind might take.

### **What Makes Writing (Assessment) “Good”?**

Writing assessment might seem at first a peculiar protagonist for the story of how writing education works to save the world. The reputation of assessment among many practitioners is such that we could reasonably expect it to be typecast as an antagonist in the discipline’s moral self-narrative, or else assigned to play the bit part of “necessary evil” or administrative nuisance.<sup>98</sup> After all, writing assessment polices the gates of our institutions. In the classroom, it disciplines students to write the “right” way, and it punishes those who do not. Wherever it is found, assessment reinforces assumptions about “good” writing, reproducing those assumptions in the habits of writers, subjecting students to and through this imagined “good.” For these same perils, though, assessment has been—since its inception—imagined as an important instrument for delivering on the discipline’s most important promises, as this dissertation has shown. In assessing writing, educators track student progress, investigate the consequences of instruction,

and determine whether goals have been met. For this reason, Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill frame discussions about assessment as

not just important, but *the most important* discussions happening on our campuses (and even beyond them) today. They affect everything about our courses and programs—who is admitted to them; how they are taught; how students, courses, and instructor(s) are evaluated; what counts as valuable in them—in essence, everything that motivates writing instructors to do the work we do. (4, emphasis in original)

To the extent compositionists have a moral mission at all, assessment of some kind necessarily accompanies it.

How then to balance the perils of assessment with its promises? What lessons does the antebellum past hold for today's classroom instructors and writing program administrators? William J. Reese cautions against asking the wrong questions of our histories of educational assessment: "History provides perspective and can illuminate the origins of testing and its challenges, benefits, and shortcomings. It cannot offer prescriptions to cure current educational ills" (230). What the antebellum past offers Writing Studies is a way to understand how human bodies came to be marked through the marking of writing. This past may not provide simple solutions for avoiding the moral messiness and contradictions that can accompany our efforts to compose progress in the writing classroom, but it can supply us with critical questions to ask ourselves about the assumptions, aims, and implications of this work. There are two general contributions that this past can make to the field of writing assessment's present. The first is that this past can help the field shift its focus from assessment methods to the aims and claims at work in assessment. This turn to assessment-rhetoric empowers us to more robustly consider the ways assessment frames and forms the body, as well as to question *which* bodies we value, *how*, and *why*. The second, related contribution is that this past can help the field broaden its consideration of the purposes of assessment to more centrally consider the multiple, at times



contradictory purposes advanced in assessment. In doing so, we gain a critical sense for how even social justice initiatives can leave injustices in place—or worse. It is with notes toward these two contributions that I conclude in the space below.

**Questioning the Bodies We Value:** The first thing we gain from careful attention to Mann’s experiments with writing assessment is a set of microhistorical case studies for exploring how writing assessments both *underwrite* social projects and cultural aims, and are also *underwritten* by them. If writing educators have a responsibility to promote social justice in-and-through assessment (see Poe, Inoue, and Elliot; Young), this responsibility includes critically assessing the underlying ecology of assumptions that give those practices form and force—assumptions not just about the nature of *writing*, but also about the *mind, race, ability, sex, class,* and *progress*. To take up this charge is to think not of assessment methods in the abstract, but to consider the local assessment-rhetorics at work whenever student writing is appraised.

Writing education is never just about written composition and what writing assessment appraises is never just words on the page. Textual bodies matter because they are imagined to say something about bodies of other kinds. The history of writing assessment supplies us with a rich terrain for exploring and mapping the assumptions, anxieties, and aims that underwrite our assessments. My historical recovery of Mann’s foundational assessment experiments represents but one beginning foray into this as-yet underexamined critical space. Yet even so, it helps us to understand the need for Writing Studies scholars to reframe conversations about the writing construct to include a discussion of the broader assessment-rhetorical construct of writing that connects any act of assessment to assumptions, aims, and claims regarding student bodies.

In the act of auditing student development, assessors of writing are—in actuality—advancing an assessment-rhetoric that makes claims about what counts as “development,” about

who counts as “developed,” and about why development in-and-through writing matters. Attention only to the generic construct of writing at work in the 1845 Boston examinations would tell us only *how* writing was assessed, not *why*—nor would we learn much about *what writing meant* to Mann and his reformer colleagues, like Samuel Gridley Howe. These early examinations audited student knowledge and the formal correctness of their written responses. This is *how* writing was tested. Mann believed students’ written performance provided a phrenological site for reading mental cultivation and heritable racial development; displaying errors in the student mind provided a rhetorical means of mobilizing public sentiment to reform Boston’s schools, rectifying the wrongs afflicting the new race of American students. This is *why* writing locally mattered and *what writing locally meant*.

We could, with good cause, claim that the genres of writing tested in the 1845 assessments were too narrow, too superficial to make any meaningful claim about the writing abilities of those tested. But the more important thing for us to be sensitive to—the more dangerous thing we must be willing to recognize and contest—has nothing to do with the sufficiency of the genres tested. No matter how fully the generic construct of writing is assessed, writing instructors and writing program administrators must be prepared to challenge the use of writing assessment to advance claims about the nature, intelligence, or human value of the student body. A more comprehensive appraisal of the writing construct should not be treated as license to make sweeping, totalizing claims about student writers and their place in society.

This dissertation calls attention to the importance of questioning the bodies we value—and the ways we value the body—through writing assessment. Questioning of this kind requires us to think through how our assessment instruments and practices are never merely scoring, grading, or responding to students. Assessment’s technical engagements with the texts are

always also complexly rhetorical—making claims and making claims possible. For writing educators to fully reckon with the consequences and social justice stakes of writing assessment, it is necessary for them first to reckon with the ways that their appraisals of writing are assessment-rhetorical, articulating claims about written composition to broader claims about social composition. As Edward M. White, William D. Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri explain, “assessment is unavoidably a political act” (1). What they describe as the “politics” of assessment, however, could be just as aptly discussed in assessment-rhetorical terms:

assessment *helps determine* what programs are approved and offered, who receives opportunity, who gains power and privilege, and who is successful. Assessment *asserts* a specific concept of what kinds of writing are acceptable and what kinds are not. Assessment *expresses* a hierarchy of values, and those who control assessment determine the values that prevail. Assessment results *identify* those who most fully internalize and support the prevailing values and who thus are most entitled to the best rewards. (White, Lutz, and Kamusikiri 1-2, emphasis mine)

The rhetorical reach of assessment extends, as we have seen, into the body itself. In F. Allan Hanson’s estimation, the influence of assessments (and tests, specifically) condition the identities we inhabit—the people we imagine ourselves, and are imagined by others, to be. Though Hanson does not describe this influence in rhetorical terms, his characterization of tests nicely captures the formative power that assessment can exert over social reality:

[i]n a very real sense, tests have invented all of us. They play an important role in determining what opportunities are offered to or withheld from us, they mold the expectations and evaluations that others form of us (and we form of them), and they heavily influence our assessments of our own abilities and worth. . . . The social person in contemporary society is not so much described or evaluated by tests as constructed by them. (3-4)

With their rhetorical power to condition social personhood, to nudge and shape educational imperatives, and to structure claims about whether those imperatives have been followed or met, it is perhaps to be expected that assessment has been tasked with rhetorically advancing the discipline’s loftiest social justice goals: among them, promoting *accountability* for quality

instruction, ensuring *fairness* for diverse student populations, regulating *inclusion* and increasing access, and promoting *virtue* by producing virtuous writers.

Of course, none of these is a recent purposing of writing assessment; each was imagined by Mann and his antebellum reformer colleagues as an assessment-rhetorical means of composing progress in the United States. Using this dissertation's case studies of these assessment-rhetorical innovations as our point of departure, we can generate critical questions about the claims our assessments make and make possible—with special attention extended to claims about the meanings and value of the body. Some initial questions we might ask ourselves about the bodies we value are the following:

- Displaying the Body: When we *display* what we find in student papers, are we drawing attention to errors in writing only—to putative defects, flaws, and failings that create student writing as a body of errors? Are we showing what we think of as successful, promising, challenging in the work? When communicating with students or other stakeholders, how do we represent these writings—and what are the implications of our choices? What messages do they send about what the (textual) body is or what it should be? And in our classrooms and writing programs, how accountable do we think instructors should be for augmenting that body?
- Comparing the Body: When *comparing* the writings of students (or groups of students) with one another, what assumptions are we bringing to this work—about writings, writers, race, ability, and more? What features of writing are we selecting to contrast and why? What aspects of writing—whether in terms of the experiences, processes or products associated with writing—do we let fade into the background and exempt from comparison? How can we compare the data generated by assessment to ensure writing education is equitable? More pointedly, how do the comparisons we choose to examine constrain (or enable) how we construct and pursue “fairness”? And what do these choices say about the aspects of the body (of texts, of writers) we care enough about to compare?
- Screening the Body: When programmatic decisions about entrance and placement are made through writing assessment, how does this process *screen* written bodies as a way of screening (out) student bodies? What aspects of writing do we identify as important enough to shape and guide institutional inclusion? On what do we make inclusion conditional? Who has control over decisions about where (if at all) bodies belong in the writing program? And what do these choices—about standards for screening the body and about power over this process—

communicate about the limits and contingencies of our commitments to inclusivity?

- Relating the Body: What kinds of *relationship* do we want students to have with writing—and with other members of the writing classroom or program? When providing students feedback, how are we training them to read and relate to their own work? What are we teaching them is important (or virtuous) about their own writing—and how are we encouraging them to think of themselves as “good” writers? When and how do we empower students to assess one another, and what are our goals when doing so? Put another way, when we ask our students to assume the position of peer critic, what does this position entail and how does it encourage students to read and relate to one another through writing? More generally, how does classroom assessment construct and constrain community?

Asking ourselves questions like these, we can more systematically come to terms with the fact that all assessment requires making choices and that, in making choices, we make claims about the kinds of textual and student bodies we value in the writing classroom. Even as our assessments seek to compose progress in the student body—seek, in Mann’s terms, to “win some victory for humanity”—they participate in rhetorically constructing that same body. If we intend to take stock of the value hierarchies our writing classrooms and programs participate in—take stock, that is, of the bodies our programs frame desirable, defective, or disposable—our conversations about writing assessment must first acknowledge and center the fact that assessment is rhetorical work, even when it is advancing aims with which we vehemently disagree. Only when we recognize the full range of claims our assessments make and make possible can we chart a new rhetorical course for writing assessment—and make amends for the injustices our assessment-rhetorics have underwritten.

The recent social justice turn in writing assessment scholarship marks a new beginning for the field’s rhetorical attention to the body. To date, the field’s most sustained consideration of bodily difference and diversity has focused on race, racism, and anti-racism—with assessment scholars staging a critical encounter between their work and critical theories of race (see, e.g.,

Inoue, *Antiracist* and *Labor-Based*; Inoue and Poe; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot). As this dissertation has argued, however, even an attention to racial injustice benefits critically from considering the ways *race* always already intersects with other social formations. What's more, racist rhetorics like those advanced by phrenology and other forms of eugenic race science rely on and reinforce injustices along other social axes: including ableism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and colonialism. Future research can support efforts to theorize social (in)justice in writing assessment by bringing assessment research into closer contact with critical theories that can contribute to an intersectional portrait of the body and its social meanings: not just critical race theory, but also disability studies, feminist theory, queer theory, decolonial theory, and trans theory, among others. The new beginning for writing assessment history provided by this dissertation is just that: a beginning. Much critical work remains still to be done. Intersectional approaches to theorizing assessment-rhetorics and their injustices must be an increasingly central part of this work, moving forward.

**“Just” Assessment:** What does it mean for Writing Studies scholars that the desire to do “good” in assessment can also be a source of injustice? How can we think through the multiple, morally contradictory purposes that assessment-rhetorics can advance? The danger of assessment, and its moral power, is that it concretizes the discipline's values, translating our abstract commitments into palpable policy and action. In this way, there has always been a subtle double meaning to the question, “What makes writing ‘good’?” Even the most technical judgments of writing quality shape and are shaped by moral judgments about what writing is *for*. Writing assessment is never exclusively about writing, because *writing* is never exclusively about writing. Lester Faigley helpfully reminds us that the word “evaluation” comes to us from the Latin “*ex + valere*—to be ‘out of’ or to ‘emerge from’ value,” etymologically signaling how

“judgments of writing quality reflect larger cultural assumptions about the purposes of literacy education” (*Fragments* 113). By monitoring and managing writing through assessment, we attempt to monitor and manage other things—writers, the future, the world. By doing good assessment, we attempt to do good.

As the field of writing assessment consolidates around efforts to maximize the social justice potential of assessment work, historiography has the opportunity and responsibility to help the field reckon with its past injustices—so that we can attempt to avoid authoring them anew. This work is perhaps most important where our injustices have been subtle, concealed or conveyed by efforts to do good. Such was the case with antebellum efforts to compose progress in the United States sponsored by Horace Mann. The moral contradictions and racist potential of writing assessment in the United States are not a recent addition. They have been with writing assessment in the United States since its inception. In these early assessments, we find examples for how even what might be called simple and narrow appraisals of student writing can serve multiple, even contradictory purposes. Consider: Each antebellum assessment innovation discussed in this dissertation was mobilized to support initiatives we might heartily endorse, even today. Displaying the student body provided a means of arguing against physical abuse as an instructional strategy; comparing student bodies helped school reformers draw attention to anti-black violence and neglect in public education; and through the ways it screened students and structured their relationships, writing assessment aided in efforts to make the college writing classroom a more inclusive and virtuous space. All to the good. Or so it might, at first, seem.

Without careful assessment-rhetorical attention, the very desirability of these interventions might mask the fact that each attempt at improving the world offers *more than* the practical good that it promises. In addition to its technical purposes and material promises, each

relies on and reinforces harmful assumptions about the body's constitution and its worth. The purposes of writing assessment were understood by Mann and his colleagues in relation to their phrenological beliefs about human nature, development, and value. So it is that each assessment-rhetoric discussed in this dissertation served (at least) three intertwined purposes: technical purposes for practical intervention in schools, ethical purposes for intervening in the moral fabric of society, and eugenic purposes for intervening in the racial substance of the population. Mann sought explicitly to intervene in social composition for the better, but his understandings of goodness and progress were nested with eugenic assumptions and aims. His efforts to advance the cause of social justice were limited by his biases about the body's worth.

Mann and his reformer colleagues are far from alone in inhabiting this morally contradictory space. Present-day efforts to compose progress in the writing classroom continue to inadvertently underwrite racist injustices. In his 2019 College Composition and Communication Conference Keynote, Asao B. Inoue noted how the imagined moral mission of the writing classroom might double as a site of racist violence, with putatively well-intentioned aims and assessment practices reinforcing "White language supremacy." Addressing the "White folks in this room," Inoue charges that

you, and White people just like you who came before you, have had most of the power, decided most of the things, built the steel cage of White language supremacy that we exist in today, both in and outside of the academy—and likely, many of you didn't know you did it. You just thought you were doing language work, doing teaching, doing good work, judging students and their languages in conscientious and kind ways, helping them, preparing them, giving them what was good for them. (8)

In calling attention to the causalities and consequences of the aims adopted by some in the field, Inoue is not rejecting the idea that writing education can do good—merely inviting mindfulness and criticality about which moral missions we endorse, and whose (racial) interests these missions serve. Emerging efforts to promote antiracism in and through the writing classroom



have helped to move the moral stakes of assessment closer to the field's most central questions and concerns. Historiography can continue this work by exploring the locally-situated ways that writing is never just about writing, and that our assessments are never innocent of social meaning.

Applying the lessons of the antebellum past to our present-day practices, we can assess our assessments by asking three questions of them, each intended to reveal something about the purpose(s) they serve:

- *What is the technical or practical purpose of this assessment?* That is to say, what is this assessment instrument or practice concretely intended to show or to do? An entrance examination in English-language writing, like the one in place in 1853 Antioch, was intended to determine student readiness for institutional inclusion. On a practical register, co-educational peer assessment at that same local site provided students with practice in identifying and correcting errors and gave student writers a broad variety of readers—supplying new social opportunities and incentives for improvement.
- *What imagined ethical purpose does this assessment advance?* How is this assessment intended to improve social organization or otherwise “save the world”? Continuing with the examples above, entrance examination at Antioch was an ethical vehicle for institutional inclusivity, vouchsafing the inclusion of populations (namely women and students of color) whose institutional belonging would otherwise be called into doubt. (Indeed, the belonging of women of color was *still* called into doubt and arbitrated on the basis of their possession of entrance certificates won through writing performance.) The ethical purpose of peer assessment was to inculcate virtuous habits in the student population, training peer critics to identify morally ennobling aspects of the peers' writings while also facilitating what was understood to be virtuous social intercourse between the sexes. (Already with these two examples, we get a sense for how the ethical imperatives at work in assessment can rely on sexist and racist assumptions—pushing back against social injustice, but doing so in ways that retain the trace of the prejudices local to the time and space.)
- *Do the assessment's assumptions participate in eugenic purposes?* In other words, does the progressive project advanced by the assessment rely on or reinforce eugenic assumptions about the body—assumptions about the need to somehow eradicate difference and deviance, in the service of purifying and perfecting the population? If an assessment seeks to promote “progress,” is it also in some way about perfecting textual and writerly bodies? In the case of entrance examination at Antioch, as we have seen, inclusivity was valued because Mann

thought writing was a better phrenological test of humanity and racial worth than was the skull or the skin; the ethical shades into the eugenic. Similarly, the virtues imagined to be inculcated through co-educational peer writing assessment were thought, through a eugenic chain of assumptions, to provide multiple means of securing population control—maximizing population quality and minimizing population quantity. “Good” assessment for Mann and his colleagues often meant eugenic assessment—an appraisal of the student body that facilitated constitutionally rewriting that body, or else recomposing the population at large.

Because every act of appraising writing, no matter how mundane or anonymous, is underpinned by a moral infrastructure composed of assumptions and aims for assessment, the same instruments or practices can serve purposes that cut across all three registers: technical, ethical, and eugenic. When we endorse an assessment, it is essential we think carefully not just about what it “does” in the abstract, but also about its local purposes and meanings—about what it is *for*. As Mann’s antebellum assessment innovations from 1845 to 1859 show, the same practices can lead in multiple directions, advancing purposes that appear—in key ways—morally at odds with one another. Examining whether and how our own present-day assessment purposes are multiple is a necessary way to reckon with the moral directions our assessments lead us—so that we can exercise appropriate caution when choosing which paths to commit our classrooms or writing programs to travel down.

Writing assessment history can provide us with critical questioning practices like this one because, at root, contemplation of the past helps us to understand that practices and policies we may take for granted came from somewhere. They have histories—which is another way of saying they were shaped by past contexts and by actors who made choices within them. Contexts change. Different choices can be made. The past can help free us from the assumption that current configurations of the writing classroom are naturally occurring. They are, instead, the product of past biases and beliefs that have survived into the present. Through historical excavation of the writing education past, we can shed light on these otherwise-hidden biases and

beliefs—so that we can debate and contemplate them, deciding whether they are biases and beliefs we wish to share, moving forward. Efforts to advance social justice in-and-through writing assessment benefit from the support historical excavations provide. Remarking on the “White language supremacy” he finds saturating the field, Inoue has drawn attention to the violent potential of aspects of assessment that educators (and, perhaps particularly, *white* educators) treat as neutral and necessary:

It takes conditions of White language supremacy to make our judgments about logic, clarity, organization, and conventions a hand grenade, with the pin pulled. ... These judgments, these standards, seem like [they’re] just about language, just about communication, just about preparation for the future, just about good critical thinking and communicating. Here’s a hint: when we start qualifying our ideas with the word “just,” we are trying to convince ourselves of the lies we are telling. We are trying to convince ourselves of a diminished sense of the power and significance of rhetoric, of words, of language. (“How” 9-10)

Much as we might claim to the contrary, our appraisals of writing are never simply *just* assessment. Though Inoue points clearly enough to the ways our assumptions supply assessment with (racist) meaning, his words have a second, equally fruitful meaning he seems not to harvest. Scholars who qualify their ideas with the word “just” can also intend to entitle those ideas as pursuant to the dictates of *justice*. When we qualify our assessments in this way, what are we trying to convince ourselves or others of? What do we mean? And if our assessments are never simply or perfectly *just* in this second sense, what can we do to bring them closer to that aim?

To ask ourselves questions like these is not to challenge the moral mission of social justice advocacy in the field. Far from it. Questioning what we mean by social justice—and examining how the moral aims advocated in the field may lead in different directions—is necessary work, if we take seriously the idea that assessment is rhetorical, and that our constructions of social justice can bear the traces of our biases and beliefs. As the antebellum history of writing assessment painfully dramatizes, our moral understandings of “good” writing

can be nested with harmful assumptions and preserve violent hierarchies—all in the name of improvement. As the field continues to theorize and promote antiracism, it will need to develop a vocabulary not just for encouraging antiracist action, but for identifying and explaining how existing moral aims can clash with this work. Against this backdrop, the most important task confronting historians of writing assessment is perhaps a deceptively simple one: Revealing how assessment is never *just* a necessary evil by excavating the myriad, morally messy ways it has attempted to do good.

The deeper story of writing assessment has always, in some way, been the story of how it was supposed to save the world. It is a story that has survived Horace Mann, and that we continue to author—if only implicitly—through our practices and our publications. A story we reinforce when we tell students what makes writing good, and that we whisper to ourselves in our most private moments, when we question why our work in the classroom matters. It is the story of who we *are*, about what writing *is*, and what both of these *should be*. It is the story of writing education and the dream of composing progress—and perhaps, like progress itself, it has no ending.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on “reframing” writing assessment—and the importance of this framing work to writing education, generally—see Adler-Kassner and O’Neill.

<sup>2</sup> See also Bizzell. If this aim to author student progress seems too mundane to constitute a moral mission, too routine to be world-saving work, John Dewey reminds us that it is the drive to shape and develop students that animates the ethical core of education: “A narrow and moralistic view of morals is responsible for the failure to recognize that all the aims and values which are desirable in education are themselves moral. Discipline, natural development, culture, social efficiency, are moral traits—marks of a person who is a worthy member of that society which it is the business of education to *further*” (417, emphasis mine). The underlying, unifying aim of progress—of helping students improve in some way—arguably propels what is most supportive and transformative about writing education. Yet in listening to Dewey’s sketch of the “worthy member of society,” it is possible to hear the undertone of a judgmental threat, buried in the moral promise of progress. Any aim to support student bodies in developing into something socially worthy veers dangerously close to declarations that—in the absence of pedagogical intervention—those same bodies are socially undesirable, bearing marks of deviancy, deficiency, or degeneracy.

<sup>3</sup> My coinage here is of course in spiritual reference to the work of Robert Connors on “composition-rhetoric,” which frames this introduction and my project.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I list co-authors for collaborations larger than two people, in part because several collaborations central to the genealogy of the social justice turn for writing assessment involve three or more scholars. Access to these authors’ names provides an important resource for understanding the emergence and shape of this conversation.

<sup>5</sup> My work here harmonizes with recent writing assessment scholarship that explores the productive complexity of *aporia*—of assessment’s complexities, multiplicities, and contradictions—including where race (Inoue, *Antiracist* 22-4) and accountability (K. Miller 150-90) are concerned.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many progress-related commonplaces important to writing education and assessment have been shown to be broad, flexible containers that can be used to *do* and *mean* different things. J. Blake Scott and Rebecca Dingo, for instance, discuss “the concept of *development* as a commonsense rhetoric” that can be attached to a number of different sites, objects, and processes (principally those related to globalization) to communicate messages about what they *are* and what they should *be* (6, emphasis mine). Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo have noted how the ways we “define ‘development’” and deploy “a rhetoric of progress, happiness, development, and the end of poverty” can mask and reinforce colonial systems of control (49). Within the contexts of education and writing education, scholars like Thomas D. Fallace, Stephen Tomlinson, and David Lee Carlson and James Albright have explored how models of child development and of evolutionary progress have historically shaped educational practices and social arrangements, often in ways that reproduce injustice (see also Hammond, “Toward”; Stein); and relatedly, D. T. McCormick has discussed how “developmental rhetorics” configure human hierarchies through the theories of human advancement they advance. Moreover, scholars of the history of science and of disability rhetoric scholars have variously shown how “merit,” “ability,” “disability,” and “intelligence” signify differently in different contexts, and have been rhetorically attached to particular bodies as a means of marking and (de)valuing them (see, e.g., also Baynton; Carson; Dolmage *Disabled*; Hasian)—points discussed at greater length in the sections to follow. Indebted to these rhetorical and historical insights about the constructions (and dangers) of progress-related concepts. My discussion of assessment-rhetoric applies insights of these kinds to the space of writing assessment, drawing attention to ways that

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assessment relies on and reinforces complex assumptions about student progress and value—and how to *mark* them.

<sup>7</sup> Following Zachary Stein and others (8), I will use the term “American” to describe people and things related to the United States, but do so understanding that this term can and does name other people and things—including, but not limited to, other North and South American territories and populations, as well as indigenous populations whose presence in the territory now claimed by the United States long predates European colonization of North America—and, for that matter, the naming of “North America” as such. In spite of its significant limitations, the term “American” is useful for my project because of its central role in the vocabularies of Mann and his reformer contemporaries.

<sup>8</sup> The most thorough and insightful overview of assessment and/as rhetoric is perhaps provided in Katrina Miller’s dissertation, *The Rhetoric\* of Writing Assessment*. In it, Miller discusses—among other things—20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century shifts in the rhetorical roles played by assessment in the writing classroom, and describes the need for a rhetorical reorientation of the field of writing assessment away from its past technocentric focus and toward a new focus on social justice and the human consequences of assessment (see also Elliot, “Theory”; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot). Returning to the antebellum origins of assessment (and its rhetorical roles in the writing classroom), my dissertation brings the kinds of insights found in Miller’s work into conversation with critical race theory, disability studies, and emerging social justice historiography in writing assessment (see Hammond, “Toward”; Harms; Molloy, arguing for an increased critical attention to the *student body* as a site of rhetorical contestation and social (in)justice (but see K. Miller 108-9, 122).

<sup>9</sup> For a longer discussion of writing assessment, historiography, and which bodies “count,” see Hammond (“Toward”). The question of the body coming to “matter,” here, is indebted to Dolmage (*Disabled* 12-4), but gains a second meaning when we consider it in light of the theory of race-writing advocated by Mann (discussed at length in Chapter 2). This theory—a writing education variant of what Kyla Schuller calls “sentimental biopower”—holds that the body’s relationship to environments and impressions (like those generated by classroom instruction) physically alter its material substance. Mann is thus part of a broader race theoretical trend in Western evolutionary thought: “Over the course of Western epistemology, the body’s relational capacity is the means through which it comes to matter” (Schuller 42)

<sup>10</sup> For one example, see Common Core State Standards Initiative.

<sup>11</sup> In the closing lines of his book *Testing Wars in the Public Schools*, William J. Reese reminds us that our present “dreams” for testing might reprise dreams that have animated the assessment past: “Anyone who believes that more and better exams will resolve problems endemic to standardized testing...can find kinship with numerous Americans who dreamed such dreams before” (233).

<sup>12</sup> Biology need not be considered the first among equals where race’s metaphorizations are concerned. In discussing the “metaphorical” life of race, Toni Morrison identifies it as “a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (63).

<sup>13</sup> Though named by Galton in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, eugenic thinking has a much longer history, linked to the idea of the “great chain of being”: a scaling of bodies that treats the human race as the apex of all living species, and positions some human races as natively superior to others (see, e.g., Winfield *Eugenics* 45-46; Tucker 9-12; also Cushman; Fallace; Hasian 14-24).

<sup>14</sup> There were, however, strands of eugenic thinking less reliant on the identification of whiteness with human quality, including African American configurations of eugenic thinking in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

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For instance, W. E. B. Du Bois was one prominent participant in this intellectual tradition (see, e.g., Hasian 51-71; Schuller 172-204).

<sup>15</sup> This eugenic vocabulary of “progress” and “development” can be found at work in a number of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century political and policy debates. For instance, Baynton reminds us that resistance over women’s suffrage around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century were often rhetorically reliant on the vocabulary of “evolutionary progress; like racial and ethnic minorities, women were said to be less evolved than white men, their disabilities a result of lesser evolutionary development” (41).

<sup>16</sup> For more on eugenics-related framings of—and interventions in—education (including in writing education), see, e.g., Elliot, *On a Scale* 32-97; Fallace; Hammond, “Toward”; McCormick; Poe, “Consequences” 271-2; Schuller; Tomlinson; Winfield, *Eugenics* and “Eugenic.”

<sup>17</sup> For more on eugenics and its rhetorical role in configuring the body’s value, see Hasian; McCormick; Siebers; Snyder and Mitchell. Snyder and Mitchell tell us,  
The devaluation of disabled bodies places in jeopardy all bodies that exist within proximity to ‘deviance’ (and ultimately no body escapes this relation), particularly given that in modernity the cultivation of technologies geared to identify deviance begins to inform the very conceptualization of embodiment. To salvage the danger that deviance poses generally, designations of disability seek to place some populations as not only anomalous to, but nearly outside of, cultural *adjudications* of functional, aesthetic, and biological *value*. (5, emphasis mine)

As discussed in this chapter, and the ones to follow, these “cultural adjudications of...value” are ones I understand, within the context of writing education, as *assessment-rhetorics*.

<sup>18</sup> Though the meanings of “validity” and “reliability” have changed in important ways over the past century (see Hammond and Moss; Huot, O’Neill, and Moore; Newton and Shaw), Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham provide helpful definitions that capture the general spirit of each term. They define *validity* “[a]s a conceptual measure” that represents “an integrated evaluative judgment derived from evidence that a measure in fact assesses what it purports to assess and that its scores are used sensitively and appropriately” (21). *Reliability*, by contrast, provides “a consistency measure”—that is, “an estimate of the ways scores resulting from measurement procedures would be expected to vary across time and circumstance (Haertel 2006)” (22).

<sup>19</sup> In a companion chapter published that same year, Yancey herself acknowledges that this approach to telling the story of writing assessment participates in a “master narrative of progress” that captivates the field’s historiographic imagination (“Brief” 121).

<sup>20</sup> Brigham, in fact, participated in the development of the WWI Army mental tests (see Elliot *On a Scale*; Lemann).

<sup>21</sup> Biography, for instance, could be considered a quintessential microhistorical genre: Rather than indulge in a sweeping, periodizing approach to writing history—tidying away the past’s complexities to make space for shallow trends and generalizations—biography dwells on complexity and relishes depth, telling the story of particular cases (events, actors, actions), and articulating those cases to broader patterns, questions, and concerns (see Gordon; McComiskey 17).

<sup>22</sup> For a general, accessible, and detailed biographical overview of Mann’s life and reform efforts, see Messerli.

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<sup>23</sup> Dolmage also makes use of this double meaning of “characterize” when discussing the reach of eugenic rhetoric into popular culture and discourse (see, e.g., *Disabled* 52).

<sup>24</sup> The article “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” contains long sections of text written by the Grammar and Writing School Committees which Mann edited and reprinted, but that he did not primarily write. (Though, as we find in Chapter 3, he advised Howe when the latter was composing the Grammar School Report.) For the purposes of clarity, when Mann is recirculating one of the Committees’ reports, my quotations will read “(qtd. in H. Mann, “Boston”....)” In all other cases, citations refer to portions that Mann has written.

<sup>25</sup> This is not to claim that assessment historiography has completely overlooked the question of intellectual context in general terms. To be sure, scholars *have* sought to show that written examination did not spring fully formed from the head of Mann, but instead emerges as part of broader social and intellectual context, and was partly informed by contemporaneous intellectual traditions—something discussed at greater length in Chapters 1 and 2. George F. Madaus, for one, regards the advent of written examination in the United States as of a piece with an industrial capitalist “movement toward standardization and conformity” ascendant in Mann’s time (Madaus 24). Patricia Lynne historicizes Mann’s call for written examination as an important link in the chain of psychometric positivism, arguing that “Mann’s ‘Daguerreotype likeness,’ for example, reflects a positivist belief that the faculties of the mind can be readily seen in writing produced by that mind” (23). The account I provide in this section of my dissertation does not argue against or cancel out these readings. However, as I intend to show, consideration of the intellectual context and import of Mann’s work is hopelessly incomplete when it fails to consider the phrenological (we might say, *eugenic*) imaginary at work in his project.

<sup>26</sup> As we will find in the following chapter, what Mann believed heritable was not information *per se*, but rather the ways the mind and body were exercised—cultivation and development (or their opposites) reshaping the bodily frame and frame of mind.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., White, Elliot, and Peckham. Constructs provide the conceptual backdrop against which any assessment is conducted, informing how we interpret the meaning(s) of writing and the meaningfulness (or the validity) of our appraisals of it (see American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education 11; Newton and Shaw; cf. Lynne).

<sup>28</sup> Even though my dissertation discusses the original reports written by the Examining Committees, I center my analysis instead on Mann’s “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” article for two closely-related reasons. First, existing scholarship in the field of writing assessment has taken not just the 1845 exams, but also *this article* specifically, as disciplinary origin points for writing assessment (see, e.g., Lynne). For this reason, I work to revise not just the field’s memory of the 1845 examinations, but also its understanding of the documentary significance of a text familiar to many in the field. Secondly, Mann’s editorial interlude within “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools,” sandwiched between his reprinting of excerpts from each Committee’s report, serves as one of the first texts to explicitly theorize the importance of writing to assessment. My interest, in this dissertation, is in the relationship between writing assessment and cultural projects that assign social value to and through writing. Treating “Boston Grammar and Writing Schools” as my core document for analyzing the 1845 examinations is one way to support this work, while doing so in a manner that speaks directly to existing disciplinary conversations about antebellum assessment.

<sup>29</sup> For brief and helpful explorations of phrenology and its medico-visual culture, see Prebel; Sekula.



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<sup>30</sup> Rich descriptions of the body-as-text can be found in Foucault, *Discipline*; Sekula. Within histories of writing education, the imagined isomorphism between human body and text is described by Carlson and Albright; S. Miller “Composition” and *Textual*; and Hammond “Toward.”

<sup>31</sup> This line of critique is echoed by Lester Mann, who derides 20<sup>th</sup>-century ability tests as instruments of “psychometric phrenology,” wrongheaded and “refurbished relics of the past” that pervert the course of meaningful assessment (13). “Whether calipers are used on a skull or pencils on test profiles it is still phrenology that is being practiced when measurements are confused with and identified as [mental] processes” (5).

<sup>32</sup> Whately even submitted a formal testimonial in support of Combe’s candidacy for a chair in logic at the University of Edinburgh, referencing what he took to be the intellectual significance of Combe’s phrenology:

I am convinced that even if all connection of the brain with mind were regarded not merely as doubtful, but as perfect chimera, still the treatises of many phrenological writers, and especially yours, would be of great value, from their employing a metaphysical nomenclature far more logical, accurate, and convenient, than [John] Locke, [Dugald] Stewart, and other writers of their schools. (qtd. in Combe *Testimonials* 5)

As we can see here, Whately betrayed little real interest in the anatomical minutiae of phrenology, instead finding in Combe’s doctrines a revolutionary psychological vocabulary (or, as he put it, a “metaphysical nomenclature”) for mental exercise and human improvement (see also Whately, “On the Origins”).

<sup>33</sup> Hermann documents this text only as Fowler and Wells’ “*Self Instructor*” (169), but from their catalogue of materials, the text referenced seems to be *The Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology, with One Hundred Engravings, and a Phrenological Chart of Character*—written O. S. Fowler and L. N. Fowler, and first published in 1849. Because Montgomery is writing her diary in 1872, it is likely she is referencing the updated version of this text—Fowler and Fowler’s *New Illustrated Self-Instructor*, first released in 1859.

<sup>34</sup> I adapt the term “race-ing” from Toni Morrison’s 1992 collection *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, and from Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey’s 2004 collection *Race-ing Moral Formation*.

<sup>35</sup> Both Hermann and Logan discuss Montgomery’s subscription to Fowler and Wells’ *Phrenological Journal* (or *American Phrenological Journal*, in Logan’s case). But if Montgomery is describing an 1872 subscription, the journal would have, by that point, been under the sole editorship of its publisher, Samuel R. Wells, and would have been read under a new name: *The Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated*. For more on phrenological self-education, see Prebel.

<sup>36</sup> Though Mann does not specify the nature of Downer’s infidelity to God’s law, the implication seems to be that Downer—by mental overexertion of his “glorious brain”—has taxed his faculties to the breaking point. Even where mental activity is concerned, there seems to be too much of a good thing.

<sup>37</sup> This focus might reflect Mann’s disciplinary background. He was, like Combe, trained as a lawyer, not—like the more cranially-oriented Gall and Spurzheim—as a medical doctor (see Tomlinson 239-64).

<sup>38</sup> Hermann lists this text only by its subtitle.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, in his sixth *Annual Report*, Mann finds himself imagining whether an enlightened posterity may not be without difficulty in determining which is the greater offence against nature,—to relieve the impotent, the diseased, the deformed child at once, of all mortal

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suffering, or to rear a race of puny, dwarfish, imbecile children, the inheritors of parental maladies, doomed to suffer through all the years of their existence for offences which they did not commit, and to leave to their own offspring a patrimony of aggravated and redoubled miseries. (“Sixth Report” 154)

<sup>40</sup> Kyla Schuller identifies this intellectual tradition as “sentimental biopower,” which held that sensory impressions (what Mann might have understood as “mental inscriptions”) could materially re-form individual and population bodies: “species,” it was believed, “originated in sensory stimulation, and civilization originated in the faculty of sentiment, granting individuals, and especially the civilized, control over their own evolution” (Schuller 37). Regulating the body’s social environment and managing the sensory impressions it takes in was understood as a physiology-altering means of “discipline and species regulation” (38), with the putatively “civilized races...learn[ing] to master their sensory impulses and thus direct the development of themselves and their descendants” (18).

<sup>41</sup> For a brief and helpful overview of this connection, see Eddy. For more on relationship between Common Sense Realism and its evolutionary theories of racial development, see Hasian 14-25, McCormick; Schuller; Tomlinson.

<sup>42</sup> The primary source documents discussed in this chapter have been productively mined by several historians interested in assessment (e.g., Madaus; Witte, Trachsel, and Walters) and receive their fullest exploration from William J. Reese in his *Testing Wars in the Public Schools*, which chronicles the early social and political history of written examination in the United States. While many of the antebellum-era quotes I am reprinting in this chapter are reprinted and discussed in the fine work of Reese and others, I will draw out phrenological associations, rhetorical dimensions, and writing-centric elements of these quotes that have, to date, been less central to our historical memory of the 1845 examinations. Occasionally, I will note where additional discussions of these same quotes can be found, so that the interested reader can engage not only those parts of the assessment past that I am recovering, but also those that my work does not emphasize, and that are already well-covered in existing scholarship.

<sup>43</sup> In some writings, Fowler and his colleagues could be found to do the same—yet their focus remained centrally on the skull and face, extending only secondary attention to other zones for phrenological assessment.

<sup>44</sup> Helpful discussions of Howe’s fame on these counts can be found in Reese; Stuckey; and Tomlinson. Bridgeman’s education commenced half a century before the more famous instruction of Helen Keller by Anne Sullivan. Sullivan, as it happens, received her instructional training at the Perkins Institution, learning her craft under Howe’s mentorship.

<sup>45</sup> Throughout his writings, too, Howe is strangely insistent upon reminding his readers that the verbal faculties of the disabled are only *analogous* to those of parrots, not actually *identical*. For instance, in a show of compassion for a charge named Edmund, Howe admits that while the youth “has not, perhaps, learned as many words as a parrot might have learned in the same time,” he is nevertheless linguistically the parrot’s superior: “idiot as he is, he is a human being, and language is already to him, what it never can be to the most loquacious parrot that ever lived,—it is a medium for the conveyance of his simple thought, and for his understanding of the thought of others” (*Training Idiots* 59). In Howe’s estimation, even the most pitiable idiot remains the parrot’s mental superior. He makes similar apologies for the supremacy of idiots over “trained monkeys [sic] and dogs” (58; see also Howe, *Letters* 85). This humanizing gesture, however generous Howe might have imagined it, emerges within a discursive context where he drew regularly on comparisons with animals in order to explain and explore the departures of the disabled from what he believed to be normative human bodies and minds. Additionally, the insistence on the difference between his charges and beasts suggests that he imagined the proximity of

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his charges to beasts as being so close that it required additional policing—lest untrained amateurs dehumanize the disabled more than Howe believed warranted.

<sup>46</sup> That Mann has *this* automaton in mind is suggested by his only other published reference to Maelzel. In relating his *Few Thoughts for a Young Man*, Mann describes the world as “our automaton,” claiming of its elements and forces that “through knowledge, we can play them all, as Maelzel plays his chess-men!” (39).

<sup>47</sup> Education may be “the great equalizer of the conditions of men” (“Twelfth Report” 251), but spelling provides at least one space in which, unhappily, social distinctions are already dissolved. “There is no such leveller as English orthography. It mingles patrician and plebeian in one common lot; and here the lot of imperfection is emphatically the lot of *English* humanity,” Mann writes (“Lecture on the Best Mode” 6, emphasis in original).

<sup>48</sup> Such was the conclusion, in fact, arrived at by a Special Committee of Boston’s Grammar School Board 1849, when it argued against the abolition of the Smith School, agreeing such “a measure” would be “suicidal in its nature and consequences” (Bigelow, Reed, Dupree, and Beecher 46), “injurious and inexpedient,” and “in an especial manner, premature and impolitic” (50; see also Levy and Jones 125, 129).

<sup>49</sup> I borrow the term “un-common” in this context from Earhart, which provides a helpful introduction to imagined difference and otherness in Boston’s common schools. See also H. Moss; Reese; Tomlinson.

<sup>50</sup> See also Saxton, Ernest. John Ernst reminds us that, “culturally specific concepts of reason were, after all, and have remained, the centerpiece of racialist thought” within the early American republic (54).

<sup>51</sup> Spurzheim, apparently, was unaware that the city of Boston had not seen fit to provide for the high school education of its black population. The Grammar and Writing schools, which would absorb the focus of the 1845 examinations, served as the terminal degree of their publicly funded education.

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed discussion of examination by “impression,” with school auditors writing brief, semi-formal remarks (as Neale does here), see Reese.

<sup>53</sup> For a more complete discussion of the challenges to Forbes in and around *The Liberator* newspaper, see Kouser. Helpful commentary for contextualizing this controversy can also be found in Baltimore and Williams; Jacobs; Kendrick and Kendrick; Levesque; and Levy and Philips.

<sup>54</sup> As it happens, Forbes’s position at the school was unable to survive this sustained criticism. Mann tells us, in an editorial footnote, that “[t]he teacher of this school was not reëlected” (“Boston” 300). Forbes was, indeed, replaced—though, against the initial hopes expressed by Mann and Howe, not by Reverend May. The School Board ultimately selected Mann and Howe’s second pick, Ambrose Wellington, for the job. For more, see Levesque; Kouser; and Moss.

<sup>55</sup> Though resolute in these views, Samuel Gridley Howe was by no means fixed in them. Later in his life, Howe’s post-Civil War work with the Freedmen’s Bureau led him to recant this desire to export freed African Americans to Africa (*Letters* 504). Looking, in 1873, to what he perceived to be failures of black governance in “Hayti,” Howe argued against racial segregation in the West Indies. Howe informed readers that “owing to the baleful effects of generations of servitude (and other cause), the negroes of Hayti, as in other West India Islands where they are left entirely to themselves, tend to revert toward barbarism, as neglected fruit to the crab” (576). The lesson, Howe thought, was clear: “the negro ... needs

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contact with more highly developed races. He imitates, rather than originates; and he may carry on and improve a civilization which he never could have initiated..." (576).

<sup>56</sup> While Howe is better known for his leading participation in the Massachusetts medical community, Mann was deeply involved in efforts to cure and contain mental illness, serving as a founding member of the Worcester asylum—one of the leading mental institutions of his day.

<sup>57</sup> Whether these additional questions were administered orally or in print, we are not told. It seems likely these questions were put to the Smith scholars orally, however—and that this oral examination was triangulated with their written performances. Elsewhere, in the context of describing the oral questioning that accompanied written examination, the Grammar School Examining Committee mentions the following: "Your committee"—that is, the Grammar School Examining Committee—"have very often been told, in the oral examination, that Ireland is longer than Madagascar; some classes have patriotically maintained the superiority in size of Nantucket over Jamaica, and stoutly asserted that Massachusetts is larger than Cuba, and this in schools where geography has been studied faithfully in the usual way" (qtd. in H. Mann, "Boston" 302). These questions, however, do seem to touch centrally on questions of *political* geography or race—meaning that the Smith students may have received alternative (or additional) questions. And in any event, Smith School data from this additional level of examination (whether oral or written) was interpreted by the Grammar School Committee in an explicitly racialized way.

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., Gay; Ladson-Billings.

<sup>59</sup> The irony of judging the mental development of Smith's students by their interest in (and knowledge of) "the condition of the colored race" deepens when we consider what the Grammar School Examining Committee likely imagined this condition to be. After all, what textbook knowledges had the Committee hoped the Smith students would have encountered and internalized? As William J. Reese points out, the texts stocking Boston's common school shelves were filled with racist, colonialist narratives about black (under)development:

Over the decades, the School Committee adopted several [textbooks] that contained unflattering depictions of Africa and its peoples. ... One local standard, Barnum Field's *American School Geography* (1832), presented pupils with the usual racial hierarchies, placing blacks and Indians in the savage or lowest state, and white Americans and Europeans alone on the civilized plane. In time, said most history and geography books, African-Americans would improve their morals and intellect, thanks to the beneficence of white-controlled public schools and Christianity. Few assumed that even well-educated African-Americans would rise very far very fast very soon. (85).

If the 1845 school examiners relied on textbooks like these to identify appropriate questions for the Smith scholars, then the requirement that the Smith scholars know "the condition of the colored race" might have meant, in practice, that these students were asked to conjure, on command, "unflattering" textbook knowledges that traffic in racist claims about black racial inferiority.

<sup>60</sup> Though their commentary on the Smith School is editorially excised by Mann from the text of "Boston Grammar and Writing Schools," the Writing School examination committee (led by William Brigham) echoes their Grammar School committee counterparts in voicing a lowered horizon of expectations for Smith's students, relative to their white peers. In their original, unedited report, Brigham and his co-authors admit of a lowered bar for the Smith School to reach, conceding that it "may not be made to compete with the other schools, yet it is believed that it can be much elevated, that its usefulness may be increased, and that it may be placed on such a footing as to answer the just expectations of its benevolent founder, as well as the rightful claims of the colored population" (qtd. in Caldwell and Courtis 226-227). The Writing School examination committee does make clear what they consider these "just expectations"

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or “rightful claims” to be. The only inference we can safely draw is that they categorically cannot include matching the performance of Boston’s white schools; after all, Brigham and his co-authors began by telling us that this, and this alone, was unreasonable to expect.

<sup>61</sup> According to the back of this photograph, the students pictured are as follows: Upper row, left to right—Asa M. Weston, Newell Tibbetts, Charles F. Childs, Nathan Fellows, Charles K. Robinson, Roswell G. Horr, Henry Clay Badger, and John Burns Weston. Bottom row, left to right—Achsae E. Waite, Frank S. Curtis, Phineas H. Clemens, Ann Adeline [“Ada”] Shepard, Mahalah Jay, Eli Jay, Roderick D. Yeoman (“1<sup>st</sup> Graduating Class,” Aniochiana). Where spellings of these names conflict with those in Antioch’s official course catalogue, I have followed the catalogue’s spelling (*Catalogue...1856-7*).

<sup>62</sup> This quote comes from an unnamed and undated summary of Austin Craig’s letter to Horace Mann on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1852—a letter which seems to have been lost (“He Writes to Hon. Horace Mann....”).

<sup>63</sup> Obliquely, this religious sect memorialized itself in the college’s name:

The leading minds, under whose auspices and by whose patronage Antioch College was founded, long ago called themselves “Christians,” not invidiously but devoutly, and in honor of the author and finisher of their faith; and they have now selected a name by which to designate their Institution, at once scriptural and commemorative, because “the Disciples were called Christians first in *Antioch*.” (*Dedication* 142)

<sup>64</sup> Antioch College Archives, Mahalah Jay Box. The Jays’ copy of this text—better known by its alternative title, *Two Lectures on Intemperance*—does not contain any marginalia or other markings, but is the only book in their collection that has received archival preservation.

<sup>65</sup> In consultation with Susan D. Abele, who holds the papers of Ann Adeline (“Ada”) Shepard, I will be referring to Ada’s archival writings by her maiden name (“Shepard”), because the materials from her time as an Antioch student (1854-1857) and before were written under this name. Letters from Abele’s collection of Ada’s papers will be cited individually, while citations to Ada’s diary writings refer back to the collection as a whole (*Papers 1850-1874*). Ada’s letters to her siblings often cover a multi-day period of time, with the events of each day dated within the text of the letter. At Abele’s recommendation, citations to these letters reference the date Shepard herself chose as the header for the letter, even when this date is not the last one covered within the letter’s content. (A letter that contains an entry for 1 Dec. 1854, for instance, will be cited as 27 Nov. 1854 when Ada herself chooses this latter date as the header for her letter.)

<sup>66</sup> Aside from the subject test in English Grammar, the “Studies” students were examined on were Ancient and Modern Geography, History, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Latin, and Greek (H. Mann, *Dedication* 135).

<sup>67</sup> This approximation is derived from Mann’s account in his “Demands of the Age on Colleges.” Historian Robert Straker sizes the college applicant pool as closer to 150 (19). Even taking this more restrictive number, Antioch’s acceptance rate would have been just over 5%.

<sup>68</sup> It might be fairer to qualify that the examination questions themselves are no longer accessible to us—if *they were ever written down at all*. While we know students were required to submit examination answers in writing, no contemporaneous account clarifies that the questions were put before to students in printed form.

<sup>69</sup> A transcript of this letter is provided in Totten, which I have used to guide my reading of the original.

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<sup>70</sup> The quotes here from James De Normandie's account (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853; see also Totten) are supplemented for detail with information from the "Requisites For Admission" advertised in Antioch's published institutional materials (see *Dedication* 135). While De Normandie, in his letter, notes that admission is scored out of 8 (the number of subjects the course catalog listed for entrance examination), he does not specifically separate the mathematical exam into the three constituent parts listed as admission requisites (i.e., Arithmetic, Algebra, and Geometry); similarly, he describes a composite "lingual exam" rather than detailing the two languages tested: Latin and Greek (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853). These last examinations in language were to stretch across multiple days, but appear to have been curtailed at the last minute: "We did not finish entirely," De Normandie confesses, "and were told we would be farther examined on Monday. On Monday however they concluded we had done as well as we could do...." (James De Normandie to Myra B. De Normandie, 5 Nov. 1853).

<sup>71</sup> Conditional (or "special") admission of this sort was by no means unique to Antioch. For one description, see Brazier, who provides a detailed and compelling account of the "Special Student" status at 19<sup>th</sup>-century Harvard.

<sup>72</sup> The entrance examinations for this class would have been held shortly after Mann passed away, but the exam structure outlined in the course catalog for this year retains the design Mann originated. Bearing in mind the short period separating Mann's death and the beginning of Thomas Hill's presidency at Antioch, we have little cause to expect that significant changes were made to examination procedures at this point.

<sup>73</sup> While still needing to prove herself in the sophomore entrance examinations, Shepard would have entered the examinations a favorite to pass them. Unlike most of the applicants to Antioch, Shepard came to the examination table a scholar already known personally by some of her examiners. Shepard was, after all, acquainted with both Pennell and President Mann, who had been impressed with Ada's scholarship at the West Newton Normal School, and encouraged her to come to Yellow Springs in the first place (see Abele).

<sup>74</sup> Quoting this same idea from Connors' article "Personal Writing Assignments," Kathleen Welsch compellingly pushes back against the idea that expository writing assignments of the kind critiqued by Connors was necessarily impersonal. Describing the essays written by Mahalah Jay, Welsch argues that these "essays reveal that the expository essay *is* personal when personally inflected," and that "contextual information" about Mahalah's "beliefs and life circumstances" helps us to understand the personal, experience-derived character of her writings ("Thinking" 33; see also *Nineteenth-Century* 251-6). Traveling down a similar but different critical path, I describe in this chapter how seemingly impersonal entrance assessment was, in an assessment-rhetorical sense, deeply personal. In the next chapter, I take up and explore the personal, culturally- and contextually-rich character of theme *criticisms* at Antioch—specifically, criticisms made of Mahalah's Antioch essays (the materials Welsch discusses), as well as criticisms of essays written by her husband, Eli.

<sup>75</sup> This approval by the School Committee is even cited as a kind of self-advertisement in the front matter for the 1837 printing of Parker's *Progressive Exercises*—its Twelfth Stereotype Edition.

<sup>76</sup> In archival record left behind by Mahalah and Eli Jay, writing assignments have survived from each of these pillars, save for math. The Antioch college catalog does not specify where and how "[r]hetorical exercises and English Compositions will be required, at stated periods, during the whole Course" of study at Antioch—only that it would be. It is unclear, then, if and how writing assessment would have been involved in the course of mathematics instruction at Antioch. For classical languages, writing assessments include written translations into English, criticized by peers and students. This kind of writing assignment

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had been, as Brereton notes, a common curricular fixture of American colleges since before the 19<sup>th</sup>-century (4).

<sup>77</sup> While uncommon prior to the 1850s, entrance examinations in English Grammar were not entirely unheard of at the time (see Wozniak). For instance, by the time Antioch was founded, Brown University had for several years required admittees “be well acquainted with ... English Grammar” (“A Catalogue ... Brown University, 1844-5” 16), and as of the 1850-1851 school year, scrutinized prospective students through a “rigid examination” on “the principles of English Grammar,” patterned in some way on exercises from Samuel Stillman Greene’s textbook *Analysis of the English Language* (qtd. in Wozniak 33). However, even schools that had some form of examination in English Grammar prior to Antioch’s founding leave little indication that this assessment was *written*, rather than oral. Antioch’s innovation was in its formal, explicit insistence on writing assessment—screened for mechanical correctness. If Antioch was not the first college to require written examination, it seems to have been the first to formalize writing as the required medium for examination.

<sup>78</sup> By contrast, “325 other college students and more than 1500 preparatory school students passed under his influence during those six years” (Straker 20), making it possible to charge that Antioch was less a college with a preparatory school than a preparatory school with a small college attached.

<sup>79</sup> For more on the rhetoric of “entitlement,” see Burke; Schiappa 113-29.

<sup>80</sup> Mary Mann recalls this incident at Antioch differently—or else recalls a second incident with similar narrative features. In a letter (sent around 1862) to Henry W. Bellows, architect of the United States Sanitary Commission, Mary described how—during Horace’s presidency at Antioch—“one gentleman promised to give 9000 dollars to the college when it was in extreme need, if a very *bright & good* colored boy would be excluded. That ... was refused. It is but justice to this gentleman, however, to say that he afterwards reconsidered this decision & gave judgment against himself” (Mary Mann to Henry W. Bellows, 1862?). Mary’s story is attended by a happy ending, the amount cited in it is larger than the \$6000 specified by Wendell, and the student at the center of the controversy is no longer a “girl” but a “boy”—yet Mary’s story, like Wendell’s, is careful to certify the student’s mental and moral worth (“bright & good”), suggesting that in the absence of phrenologically passing at Antioch, this student would be presumed the opposite.

<sup>81</sup> For the spelling of Fanny’s name, I have followed Antioch’s archival file on the Hunster family, even though Antioch’s 1857-1858 course catalogue lists her name as “Fannie.”

<sup>82</sup> This concern was hotly debated in the pages of *Christian Palladium* and *The Christian Sun*—newspaper organs of the Christian Connection that helped found Antioch—when the college was first conceived (see D.M.)

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, Harlan seems to suggest his concern is that the girls will be admitted to the *college*; which is not necessarily the case. That said, as preparatory school students, the Hunters could have attended college classes—this was a privilege extended to students on the basis of their enrollment in the preparatory school.

<sup>84</sup> To date, the most sophisticated writing studies engagement with theme criticisms can be found in Michelle Braziers’s dissertation *The Making of Gertrude Stein*, which details not only Stein’s theme writing at Harvard and Radcliffe, but does so with attention to the ways Stein’s readers responded to her themes. Powerful engagements with theme writing can also be found in Welsch, *Nineteenth-Century* and “Thinking”; Zenger.

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<sup>85</sup> When describing the choice to discuss Hill's rhetoric of health in terms of "inoculation," Paine entertains but rejects the alternative term "prophylaxis." Explaining Hill's rhetorical theory, Paine writes, "The strength to resist the pernicious effects of public rhetoric comes from within the writer herself, from habits of good English developed in the classroom and from the immunity provided by exposure to great genius. So, rather than 'prophylaxis' (a general term for all sorts of disease prevention, including devices, hygiene, nutrition, etc.), 'inoculation' seems to better describe how composition prepares the student-citizen for the unwholesome atmosphere of public discourse" (141-2). My choice to describe Antioch's ideal writer as "hygienic" rather than "resistant" is indebted to Paine's deliberation here between the terms "prophylaxis" and "inoculation," because hygiene's closer proximity to bodily health and disease are central to Mann's race-writing project.

<sup>86</sup> I adapt the term "cultures of correction" from Nick Peim, who writes: "The subject English has historically been implicated in models of practice based on ideas of cultural heritage, on a *culture of correction*, on a liberal culture of individual creativity, on a model of multiculturalism or on a model of transmission of cultural capital" (8, emphasis mine).

<sup>87</sup> A maverick theorist who coined the term "psychometry," Buchanan was an important figure in the movement to theorize human impressibility—the focus of Kyla Schuller's recent *Biopolitics of Feeling*. The themes composed by Eli and Mahalah Jay retrace the ground Buchanan covers in the "Review of the Gallian System of Phrenology" published in his *Outlines of Lectures* (1-30), suggesting that they consulted this text when preparing their essays.

<sup>88</sup> Situating themselves in this way, Mahalah and Eli "inflect the personal rather than produce the personal," as Welsch puts it ("Thinking" 36); these student authors reveal personal attachments to the theme through the way each "selects information, interprets a subject, includes quoted material, and chooses words and turns of expression" (20).

<sup>89</sup> Instructors deployed also what may have been a local letter-based grading system, with letters "(S.)," "(V.)," and "(C.)," regularly written by instructors in the top margin of a composition's first page. An extensive search of Antioch's archives, aided by its archivist Scott Sanders, yielded no surviving key for the meanings of these letters.

Antioch's writing classrooms were by no means the only ones in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States to adopt an ostensibly thread-bare system of instructor-led writing assessment. Albert Kitzhaber has shown that, by the century's end, instructor criticism of themes increasingly took on the form of "theme-correction symbols and abbreviations" prescribed in textbooks (215). Theme assessment sometimes even came in the shape of pre-made "'Correction Cards, or 'Theme Cards,' printed on heavy stock" (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric* 144), intended to standardize and streamline the appraisal of student writing. Edward Tyrrel Channing used a set of symbols when correcting students' papers, marking them primarily for perceived flaws in style and taste (see Cameron 16-7).

<sup>90</sup> The first and third of these instructor comments appear, respectively, at the tops of Eli's compositions "An Account of the Wars between Rome and Carthage" and "Were the Conquests of Alexander the Great beneficial to mankind?" The second of these comments comes from the top of Mahalah Jay's composition "Was the Norman Conquest a Benefit to England?"

Brief critical remarks of this kind seem to be the only form of instructor criticism that has survived, but there is more than a good chance that instructors provided some form of *oral* theme criticism to students—a possibility Welsch raises in her work on Mahalah's theme papers (*Nineteenth-Century* 247). In fact, several of the surviving writings of Ada Shepard discussed in this dissertation suggest this was the case.



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<sup>91</sup> Anonymous instructor comments on Eli Jay’s paper “Life and Character of Robert Bruce, King of Scotland.”

<sup>92</sup> While Parker’s text is the only one cited within Antioch’s official course catalogue (used, as it was, in the College’s Preparatory School), Whately’s *Elements* is revealed in Ada Shepard’s diary to be the basis for the lectures of William Doherty, Antioch’s first Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (Ada Shepard to Kate Shepard, 15 Sept. 1854).

<sup>93</sup> Discussing the imagined relationship between “good writing” and moral cultivation that was a hallmark of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writing education, Welsch discusses “how the development of the writer’s mind was imagined as the primary aim of nineteenth-century composition-rhetoric instruction, but is not simply preoccupied with an abstract theory of mental development or issues of correctness and form” (“Thinking” 20). This insight gains additional weight when we remember that even issues of correctness had moral implications—signaling, as this chapter suggests, the author’s care and commitments to purification and progress.

<sup>94</sup> Instructor comments on the first page of Mahalah Jay “Was the Norman Conquest a Benefit to England?” in the Antioch College Archives, Mahalah & Eli Jay Papers, Folder “Mahalah Papers 1854-55.”

<sup>95</sup> Whately, as it turns out, is more circumspect about how these terms are to be defined—though he does name “Purity” and “Grammatical Propriety” as key characteristics of elocution (337), and discusses “chaste” writing in the gendered context of a “natural, and masculine style” (314).

<sup>96</sup> For a helpful overview of Mann’s beliefs about women and racial progress, see Tomlinson 289-96.

<sup>97</sup> Considering the anti-black anxieties some white parents expressed over integrated education at Antioch (see M. Mann 442-3), it seems possible that resistance to co-educational peer writing assessment might have been pronounced in instances where interracial peer assessment was involved. Not specific record of a racist resistance to co-educational writing assessment seems to have survived, however.

<sup>98</sup> For more on these framings, see, e.g., Weigle 194; Adler-Kassner and O’Neill; Lynne.

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