

# Introduction

## *Portrait of Isaac and Rosa*

The boy and girl looked toward the camera. They were just old enough to understand the task assigned them: to stand very still, with arms linked, and direct their gaze to the contraption in front of them. Isaac was eight and Rosa, six. How two former slave children from Louisiana ended up in a Broadway photographer's studio in 1863 requires some explanation. For now, it is enough to know that both children had been the property of slaveholders in New Orleans not long before their image was printed on *cartes-de-visite* (a new format for photography in the mid-nineteenth century, allowing for more than one copy, on individual cards, made cheaply) and offered for sale. The sale of their portrait would fund newly established schools for former slaves in southern Louisiana, a region already occupied by the Union army. In fact, the Civil War still had its hold on the nation, with death tolls and discontent on the rise. The portrait of Isaac and Rosa, at once charming and provocative, said much about the uncertainties that hung in the air that year.

They would have made an uncommon pair, the black-skinned boy and the white-skinned girl. Although there were many racial taboos in nineteenth-century America, a white girl on the arm of a black boy was surely one of the most scandalous. That Rosa was a “colored” girl who only looked white—that she toyed with a person's ability to see blackness at all—only made the pair of them more intriguing. Isaac wore a suit with tie and collar, his cap in hand, and Rosa a dress and cape, full petticoats, and a fancy hat. Despite their young ages, they stood posed like a gentleman and lady making an entrance. But that was much the point of the photograph: to anticipate the adults they would become. The portrait “Isaac and Rosa, Emancipated Slave Children from the Free Schools of Louisiana,” was, above all, a picture about the future. Or, rather, about the many futures that seemed possible in 1863.

Isaac and Rosa were emissaries of a message they only partly understood. Both children had been born into slavery in the South, freed by the Union army in 1863, and, with several other freed children and adults, taken on tour in the North. Three of the children, including Rosa, appeared to be white—a testament, their sponsors argued, to the brutal system of slavery that condoned the sexual exploitation of enslaved women by white men and, in turn, produced children as fair-skinned as any “white” child. Through public appearances and the sale of photographs, the group’s sponsors proposed to raise money for the education of former slaves recently freed in the South. Yet the timing of this tour suggests that Isaac, Rosa, and the others were part of a larger campaign. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all enslaved people in Confederate-held territory. Although it did not free every enslaved person (some, within Union territory, remained enslaved while many others had already freed themselves by following Federal troops), it made it clear that the abolition of slavery would be a result of the Civil War. Since the proclamation’s signing, the war had become increasingly unpopular in the North, where a large urban working class resented the conscription of its men in a war to end slavery, particularly when wealthier men could buy their way out of service. These same workers also dreaded the competition that might come from millions of freed blacks from the South who would work for low wages. Only a few months before Isaac and Rosa had their picture made in New York, draft rioters had taken to the city’s streets, burning buildings and assaulting people, often targeting the local black population.<sup>1</sup>

The urban working class was not alone in its anxiety about the end of slavery. Middle-class northerners, too, fretted over the consequences of abolition. The antislavery movement had for some time argued that slavery could be abolished peacefully, with little disruption to the South’s plantation economy, an economy on which northern manufacturers depended. Still, many in the North looked warily at the prospect of immediate emancipation. At best, skeptics declared, former slaves would refuse to work or would move north en masse to escape the plantations, leaving the South’s cotton fields to lie fallow. At worst, freedpeople would seek revenge against their former masters, fulfilling Thomas Jefferson’s dark visions of slave emancipation as a race war.<sup>2</sup>

Abolitionists did what they could to assuage such fears. Lydia Maria Child, for instance, in an antislavery pamphlet published in 1860, re-

counted tales of earlier, peaceful emancipations in the Caribbean that proved profitable for Atlantic markets. After presenting evidence from Jamaica, Montserrat, even Haiti (the black republic that resulted from a violent slave revolt—because rights had been denied slaves, Child wrote, not because they had been granted them), the author concluded: “History proves that emancipation has *always* been safe. It is an undeniable fact, that not one white person has ever been killed, or wounded, or had life or property endangered by any violence attendant upon immediate emancipation, in any of the many cases where the experiment has been tried. On the contrary, it has always produced a feeling of security in the public mind.”<sup>3</sup>

Few images could better foreshadow a peaceful emancipation than Isaac and Rosa’s portrait. By some readings, their photograph was an assurance to northern viewers about the future after slavery. The image of neatly dressed “emancipated slave children” who were attending school, preserved in portraiture on photograph cards and posed like their white northern middle-class counterparts, presented education as the means to transform young former slaves into models of discipline and propriety. Schooling children like Isaac and Rosa, guiding them by the light of northern “civilization,” would eradicate slavery’s effects, producing instead industrious young people with the desires of free market consumers. From the looks of Isaac and Rosa, emancipation *would* be peaceful and prosperous for the nation. This was the vision of the children’s sponsors, perhaps—their vision of the transition from slavery to freedom—but there were others.

As a remnant of history—or a “relic of the Civil War,” as someone later scrawled down the side of the *carte-de-visite*—Isaac and Rosa’s photograph is more prism than portrait. Although it was created as antislavery, pro-emancipation propaganda, in truth, it could be read a number of ways, depending upon the viewer, since like most propaganda, the photograph engaged the arguments of opponents as well as supporters. It evoked not only an orderly emancipation but also its opposite. Common to every possible reading of this photograph, however, from the most hopeful to the most pessimistic, was the notion that such children might be the heralds of slavery’s aftermath.

Looking at Isaac and Rosa, for instance, some nineteenth-century viewers may have seen abolition’s triumph. Free people of color, in particular, had long begun to doubt the possibility of freedom and equality for people of African descent in the United States. In the 1850s and

1860s many of them began looking to Mexico and Haiti as havens from the repressions of the antebellum South. They looked for a country in which they and their children could prosper, a place where race would no longer be a barrier to citizenship. For free people of color, the image of Isaac and Rosa could have been an assurance that their children would enjoy the benefits of a public education, with the support of the federal government. For former slaves, too, the education of their children was critical to protecting their rights and autonomy after emancipation. As one former slave testified to Union officials in June 1863, the reason freedpeople were so determined to send their children to school was that “the children in the after years will be able to tell us ignorant ones how to do for ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Freedpeople’s demands that their children receive regular schooling became central to labor negotiations with planters and federal agents throughout the South after emancipation. To consider Isaac and Rosa from the perspective of former slaves, therefore, is to see black freedom’s promise. So young, without the visible scars of bondage, their faces still unlined by grief and sun, their tailored clothes a far remove from the coarse shirts and bare feet of slave children, this generation might be spared the full agony of slavery and establish themselves as free people.

As a representation of both slavery and freedom, however, this photograph would have been as frightening to some as it was hopeful to others. Among white northern viewers, in fact, the portrait of Isaac and Rosa might have raised more eyebrows than it did donations. If their youth and innocence pointed to slavery’s cruelties, Rosa’s pale skin brought slavery close to home for white northerners. Aimed at white viewers, it was a racial argument in visual terms, advocating slavery’s destruction. Here was an institution that could enslave not just black children but children as light-skinned as Rosa. What, then, would keep rogue slaveholders from enslaving white people? Many northerners who had reached the South during the war had noted the large number of enslaved people who seemed to be “white.” The racial anxieties Isaac and Rosa may have stirred were not limited to the spread of slavery, however. The black-skinned boy and the white-skinned girl, both of whom were “colored,” raised questions about who was “white” and who was not, and how someone could (or could not) tell the difference. What were the consequences of freeing racially ambiguous people like Rosa? Would emancipation encourage further “mixing” between the races? Would it throw *all* “white” people’s whiteness into question?

The sight of these educated freedchildren, in suit and starched petticoats, foretold of another transformation as well: the disappearance of a black agricultural labor force in the South. Isaac and Rosa were not dressed for a day's work in the fields. As representatives of the campaign for the education of freedpeople, this pair in middle-class attire bode ill for southern planters as well as northern industrialists. Southern slaveholders had made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write for fear that they would forge their own passes, absorb the radicalism of antislavery tracts, and otherwise plot their way to freedom. But the fears of slaveholders also sprang from their own vulnerability. For all their talk about their slaves' dependence on them, it was they who were dependent on their slaves. In one southern educator's view of slave emancipation, "The cook, that must read the daily newspaper, will spoil your beef and your bread. The sable pickaninny, that has to do his grammar and arithmetic, will leave your boots unblacked and your horse uncurried."<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of southern planters, then, the image of Isaac and Rosa would have foretold the collapse of the plantation economy and a social revolution of frightful proportions. Yet some white southerners predicted that the education of black children would have even more dire consequences, expressing apocalyptic visions tinged with fears about sexual interaction between blacks and whites after slavery. One Louisiana legislator argued in 1864, in the course of debates over the abolition of slavery in the state, that the prospect of educating black children would lead to bloody race riots.

The visions of black freedom that children like Isaac and Rosa conjured are the subject of this book. As members of the first generation of African Americans to grow up in the former slaveholding republic, the black child—freedom's child—represented the possibility of a future dramatically different from the past, a future in which black Americans might have access to the same privileges as whites: landownership, equality, autonomy. The "problem of freedom" (to borrow historian Thomas Holt's phrase), therefore, was not limited to what kind of labor system would replace slavery, whether former slaves would receive land, or even whether they would learn to read and write.<sup>6</sup> Struggles over the meaning of freedom—that is, over what slave emancipation would mean in practice—were attempts to spell out what *should* be. The problem of freedom, in the largest sense, was how to reconcile the conflicting visions of the future that slave emancipation inspired.

In this, the black child became both muse and metaphor. While some

views of the black child were infused with hope, others burdened their prophets with frightening images of disorder. Through representations of freedom's child and her future, nineteenth-century Americans anticipated the social, political, and economic consequences of slave emancipation. The meanings attached to the black child in the nineteenth century, in turn, reflected the multiplicity of imagined consequences of black freedom from slavery: the expansion of a transatlantic free black community, threats to white nationalism and white supremacy, the transformation of former slaves into free laborers under the banner of Anglo-Saxon civilization, the assertion of black autonomy and equality, and racial discrimination after slavery.

Visions of the future, competing for space within any historical present, are the very fiber of social struggle.<sup>7</sup> Conflicts over the fate of the freedchild—that is, over the consequences of slavery's abolition—constituted a many-sided debate over the destruction or preservation of a brutal racial hierarchy in the United States. This debate had been, for abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, the ideological crux of the Civil War. Fearing that the true meaning of the Civil War was being erased in favor of romanticized stories of military bravery and national reconciliation, Douglass reminded an audience in 1878 that the sectional conflict had been “a war of ideas, a battle of principles . . . a war between the old and new, slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization.”<sup>8</sup> If the opposing sides in this ideological battle were clear for Douglass, however, the archives have preserved a more complicated struggle. The debate over the meaning of the Civil War that so frustrated Douglass, in fact, had its roots in the aspirations and fears Americans brought to the prospect of slavery's abolition. Free people of color, white northern audiences, freedpeople, former slaveholders, white northern military officials and reformers, politicians north and south—all these groups brought to slave emancipation radically different ideas about black freedom.

To render these competing visions, each of the chapters that follow tells a separate story about the end of slavery and its aftermath. Though distinct, these stories are connected by the struggle they narrate: the fractious debate over racial hierarchy and racial equality at the dawn of slave emancipation in the United States. Through the prism of freedom's child, we see the uncertainty of the nation's future, the untidy sum of projected hopes and fears, as slavery gave way to freedom. We can see that the battle over the future of the nation's racial hierarchy

was not just a conflict about political power, civil rights, and wage scales. Rather, as Frederick Douglass reminded his audience, it was also a struggle over worldviews and aspirations. As Douglass also recognized, the social issues raised by emancipation would last for generations. White supremacy, as an ideology and as a legal and social system, flourished for one hundred years following the end of the Reconstruction in the South. With a close eye to the competing visions of the future that the freedchild inspired, we uncover both the ideologies that fed the swell of white supremacy after the Civil War and those that might have stemmed it.

It is to these diverse and competing views, then, that the chapters of this book are dedicated. In roughly chronological order, each chapter presents another view of the transition from slavery to freedom, and each is constructed around a theme that ties those ideas together—emigration, racial classification, civilizing missions, labor, and public schools. Chapter 1 begins with the 1850s, when, under the increasing racial repressions that preceded the war, free people of color encouraged their children to forecast lives for themselves in places outside of the United States, in countries that might offer them freedom and equality. In letters inquiring about and imagining migration to the Caribbean, free children of color acquired the space to script their own futures, free of the repressions of a slave society, as well as a sense of transatlantic ties that bound together people of color and strengthened them in the fight against inequality. Chapter 2 studies northern abolitionists' enlistment of light-skinned, "white"-looking enslaved girls in an ideological campaign against slavery. Light-skinned girls like Rosa conjured the past and future of sexual relations between blacks and whites sanctioned by slavery. And they seemed to foreshadow both the blurring of racial categories (such that "white" people might be enslaved if slavery continued) and the difficulty of classification that would come once "white"-looking slaves became free. Representations and images of light-skinned slave girls, in fact, served to argue that slavery's spread threatened the freedoms of "white" people. Chapter 3 considers the ideas of reformers and missionaries in the wartime and postbellum South. Visions of former slave children, transformed from "ragged" slaves into tidy freedchildren, projected the future for freedpeople in the South as part of a larger Anglo-Saxon civilizing mission—so large, in fact, that the cause of freedpeople and their education eventually fell to the wayside in the effort to spread Anglo-American civilization in the

late nineteenth century. Chapter 4 focuses on struggles between freedpeople and planters, both of whom saw black children and their labor as instrumental to black self-sufficiency. Freedpeople and former owners used the system of apprenticing freedchildren to a “master” or “mistress” as a means, respectively, to achieve or to thwart the autonomy of former slaves. In struggles over apprenticeship, both sides enacted their definitions of free labor in the postbellum South. Finally, with chapter 5, in debates among politicians and activists, black and white, the issue of the black child’s public education—namely, whether she would be segregated from or integrated with white children in public school—became an augur for the future of race relations in the South and the nation. Where white supremacists defended segregation as the only means of maintaining social order in the South, far-seeing proponents of school integration in the nineteenth century predicted the long and tragic consequences of Jim Crow.

Although the history of freedom’s child is concerned, for the most part, with adult visions of the black child, the reader will find here the real children who inspired many of those ideas, children such as Armand Nicolas and André Grégoire, Rosa Downs and Isaac White, Elsie and Puss, Ella Washington and Porter Nickols, Clement Dellande and Olivia Edmunds.<sup>9</sup> The first chapter even renders individual children’s voices, through the letters of free children of color. Throughout this book—in the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war, in court testimonies, photographs, legislative debates, newspaper accounts, and missionary reports—I have tried to emphasize individual children and their stories, whenever possible. And I have chosen to define their social role as “children” not solely by their ages (although most of the “children” you will meet in these pages were under seventeen) but also by their dependence upon adults. It was both their youth and their status as dependents whose futures could be decided by adults that made them the subject of such speculation, debate, and struggle.<sup>10</sup> The terms I have used to refer to some of the subjects herein—“freedpeople,” “freedwomen,” and “freedchildren”—are ones of both utility and economy. Some recent historians have adopted “freedpeople” as a better descriptor, in place of “freedmen,” even though “freedmen” was perhaps the more common term in the nineteenth century. I have adopted “freedwomen” and “freedchildren,” as well, because they serve to identify particular social groups, with particular sets of concerns, and groups

who were of interest to reformers, former owners, and political leaders in the aftermath of emancipation.

The reader will also notice the use of much visual evidence in the second and third chapters. Only after writing this book to its end did I understand why I was so drawn to photographs. Because they are documentary images (in the sense that they rendered living, breathing people), looking at them we seem to share, or nearly so, the vision of nineteenth-century viewers—that is, we see what they saw, in the most mechanical sense—in a way that no other documents from the period allow. (I am reminded here of critic Roland Barthes’s recollections of seeing a photograph of Napoleon’s brother, taken in 1852: “And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: ‘I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor.’”)<sup>11</sup> And yet, there is nothing direct about how Isaac and Rosa appeared to their contemporaries. Indeed, what is useful about their portrait is that it tells more than one story: here was a world turned upside down or right side up, depending on who was looking at it. Reading these photographs, finding our way into the place and time that gave them meaning, is quite difficult. But my aim has been to uncover what Americans imagined would happen after slavery’s demise. And in the portraits of children like Isaac and Rosa we have a precious window, however obscured.

This book begins and ends in Louisiana, and with the activities of New Orleans’s French-speaking free people of color, or Afro-Creoles. This population has been left out of histories of the South, the Civil War, and slave emancipation in the United States because many writers have considered it unrepresentative of the African American population in the South, slave or free. While this group did share a vision of freedom for all people of color that went beyond the U.S. South—a vision that included other points around the Caribbean—in this they were not an aberration but something of a vanguard. By 1861, before the start of the Civil War, even Frederick Douglass, the leading black abolitionist in the United States, had come to think that Haiti might be a place more promising for the equality of blacks than his native country. The Afro-Creoles’ intellectual accomplishments (many of them were writers and poets), combined with their long history of political activism, made them, along with Frederick Douglass, the most eloquent and forward-thinking proponents of the rights of freedpeople and formerly free people of color after the Civil War. As we will see, with the end of

Reconstruction and the hardening of the color line in the South, the Afro-Creoles launched numerous legal challenges in efforts to keep the United States from becoming “two peoples” on opposite sides of a racial divide, most famously with the landmark antisegregation case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Their very public struggle for racial equality was, by their terms, a question not of southern repression but of national citizenship. Its inspiration was a vision of the future in which all Americans would be equal citizens, regardless of race, color, or previous condition. Indeed, the most positive interpretation of the portrait of Isaac and Rosa—that emancipation signaled a future of equal opportunity for blacks as well as whites—would surely have come from the Afro-Creoles of New Orleans. And so it is with them that we begin the story of freedom’s child.