

Book Review *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia* by Candace Epps-Robertson

Ryan Skinnell San José State University

Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, & Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia exemplifies the benefits of local history. As her subtitle suggests, Candace Epps-Robertson examines the complicated nexus of race, literacy, and citizenship in America, focusing on a school district in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision. *Brown v. Board*, one of the most consequential Supreme Court decisions in American education, overturned decades of legally-sanctioned “separate but equal” schooling and compelled racial integration in public schools. More than 60 years later, it is easy to look back at *Brown* and see it as a victory for civil rights and racial equality. To a degree, it was. But as Epps-Robertson demonstrates, in many places the response to *Brown* was anything but celebratory. In 1954, for instance, Prince Edward County’s all-white board of supervisors did nothing to integrate the county’s schools. The same was true in many Southern public school districts. When the federal government implemented additional measures in 1959 to compel reluctant schools to integrate, many relented, but Prince Edward County’s board of supervisors got destructively creative. Rather than integrate, the board of supervisors withdrew funding and shut the public schools down. Prince Edward’s public schools remained closed until 1964—a full decade after *Brown v. Board*—when the US Supreme Court ordered them re-opened.

Prince Edward County’s educational history is fascinating in its own right, but as Epps-Robertson argues persuasively, white citizens’ opposition to integration in Prince Edward County demonstrates a fundamental—and hardly settled—struggle over literacy, citizenship, and race that vastly exceeds one locale in rural Virginia. Epps-Robertson contends that literacy and citizenship have a very complicated relationship in America, and perhaps most especially in the Black community. In her introduction, she details some of the ways in which literacy has been used over the course of American history to both subjugate marginalized communities (often, but not exclusively, in the form of denying people access to literacy) and to uplift them (often, but not exclusively, in the form of providing access to education). Neither literacy nor citizenship is a universal remedy to systemic oppression, and in fact, both are complicated by their relationship to one another.

In chapter 1, Epps-Robertson provides historical, racial, and educational contexts to frame her study. She shows how significant the Black population was in Prince Edward County beginning in the mid-1750s. Despite their presence, however, Black citizens had few formal education options. Even when options were available, they were substandard. In other words, Black education and white education in Prince Edward County were always separate but never equal. It is within this context that Epps-Robertson situates the Prince Edward board of supervisors’ reaction to *Brown* in 1954. In short, white resistance to integration (segregationists dubbed it “Massive Resistance”) extended

two centuries of white Prince Edwardians' efforts to prevent Black access to education, literacy, and citizenship.

Chapter 2 is organized into two significant sections. In the first half of the chapter, Epps-Robertson draws on extensive archival research to detail segregationists' rhetorical efforts to prevent integration. She argues that segregationists, including prominent senators and congressmen, drew on rhetorics of states' rights, freedom and liberty, and southern identity to defend segregation as necessary to their "way of life." Epps-Robertson focuses particularly on Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr., whose arguments for segregation equated segregated schooling with good citizenship. Representative of responses to *Brown* throughout the South, Byrd's advocacy for the "Virginia Way" drew on beliefs about tradition, culture, and social norms to suggest that integration would fundamentally undermine what it meant to be a citizen of Virginia. It was in this rhetorical context that the decision to close Prince Edward's public schools was made. This historical context frames the second half of chapter 2, in which Epps-Robertson delineates responses to the school closures by members of Prince Edward's Black community. As she explains, "[s]ome Black families moved outright, while others would wake in the early predawn hours to transport their children across county lines to localities with functioning schools" (44). Some Black citizens opened their homes to children in the community, and others homeschooled. Black churches provided space and support for civil rights organizing, and the NAACP pursued legal avenues for overturning the school closures. Citizens and civil rights groups also organized protests, sit-ins, and petition drives.

In chapter 3, Epps-Robertson turns her attention to one of the most significant efforts to fight "Massive Resistance," which was the establishment of the Prince Edward County Free School in 1963. Backed by the federal government, the Free School was an integrated public school that served more than 1500 students—mostly Black, but some white—in the one year it was opened. Epps-Robertson argues that the Free School both met the need for public education and responded directly to white supremacist rhetorics of resistance. She contends in particular that the Free School's pedagogical practices and literacy education were designed to cultivate Black students' citizenship practices. Although administrators and teachers disagreed over how best to provide literacy education to meet the goals of supporting informed citizenship, the Free School ultimately balanced teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogies to support students' diverse educational goals as best they could under the circumstances. Epps-Robertson carefully situates the pedagogical and administrative practices—and their benefits and challenges—of the Free School in relation to rhetoric and composition scholars' historical knowledge, and in so doing, demonstrates how local history can complicate our beliefs about the vital connection between literacy education and citizenship.

In chapter 4, to drive the point home, Epps-Robertson interviews former Free School students to gauge their reactions to their time there. Interviewees expressed widely varying sentiments about their experiences at the Free School, including differences of opinion about the quality of educational offerings, the effectiveness of the endeavor in general, and the Free School's usefulness in challenging "Massive Resistance." The interviewees' experiences are both intimately connected and widely divergent, which is why it's such a useful and important chapter for illustrating Epps-Robertson's argument about the complex, and sometimes contradictory, relationship of race, literacy,

and citizenship represented by the Free School.

In her final chapter, Epps-Robertson draws lessons from the Prince Edward Free School experiment to inform contemporary discussions about race, literacy, citizenship, and education. Noting, for example, connections between “Massive Resistance” and contemporary discussions of privatization, vouchers, and school funding, Epps-Robertson invites readers to think carefully about how education, literacy, and citizenship are connected to social and racial justice, freedom, and critical engagement, as well as to systematic oppression, racism, and injustice. For Epps-Robertson, the Free School “provide[s] us with a most intriguing set of possibilities to reflect upon if we are to continue to invest in literacy as a means for developing a just and equitable society” (121).

Resisting Brown concludes with the unsettling—if not terribly surprising—observation that the challenges Free School teachers faced are still very much with us in American education. And as with the Free School example, Epps-Robertson makes the compelling case that literacy and citizenship are not silver bullets for solving the problems of white supremacy, unequal educational access, and racial suppression. Still, Epps-Robertson ultimately calls for reinvesting in literacy education specifically designed to support citizenship as a way to strengthen students and their communities. It is not a new call, but readers would be well served by picking up Epps-Robertson’s book to see why her particular call is one worth heeding.

WORKS CITED

Epps-Robertson, Candace. *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2018. Print.