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Literacy, Voting Rights, and the Citizenship Schools in the South, 1957–1970

This essay examines the history of a massive literacy campaign called the Citizenship School Program that began as a response to the racist literacy tests that disenfranchised countless African American voters throughout the Southern United States between 1945 and 1965. The Citizenship Schools prepared thousands of African Americans to pass the literacy test by using materials that critiqued white supremacism and emphasized the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights.

In their landmark work examining national literacy campaigns, Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff argue that successful literacy initiatives since the Reformation are distinguished by similar features: First, a triggering event that helps to make the literacy campaign possible; second, a unified goal or purpose that drives the need for literacy; third, the swift mobilization of vast numbers of people by a charismatic figure who helps to draw individuals to literacy work; and, fourth, ideological materials that emphasize social transformation over individual gain as a result of literacy achievement. While Arnove and Graff survey literacy movements associated with large-scale nation-state building in Reformation Germany, early modern Sweden and Scotland, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia, and in other sites, I suggest in the following

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essay that many of the features of successful literacy campaigns that they identify can be applied to literacy initiatives in a twentieth-century U.S. context.

I recount here the history of one regional literacy project called the Citizenship School Program, which began as a response to the racist literacy tests that disenfranchised countless African American voters throughout the Southern United States between 1945 and 1965. These tests were administered by white election officials to hinder African Americans from registering to vote. In the southern states of Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama, North Carolina, and Georgia, the test took many forms. According to Sandra Brenneman Oldendorf, "The requirements ranged from filling out a registration form unassisted in Virginia to interpreting a complicated section of the state constitutions in Louisiana and Mississippi" (40). White election officials in these states were confident that they could keep African Americans out of the voting booths because of their conviction that a majority of the population could not read or write well enough to pass a literacy test. Although the literacy tests were ostensibly racially neutral, they were administered in a way that excluded blacks, not whites, from registering. To ensure that illiterate whites were not disenfranchised, alternatives to literacy were provided if the registrant could "understand and interpret" the constitution, owned property, or was "of good character" (Levine 12).

In response to such race-based voter suppression, the Citizenship Schools were founded to teach African Americans basic literacy skills so that they might pass the literacy test required for voter registration. While the Citizenship Schools did not overtly challenge the inequities of the literacy test itself, they prepared thousands of African Americans to pass the test in the hopes that they would then vote corrupt politicians out of office. In addition, the Citizenship School literacy curriculum critiqued white supremacism by foregrounding African American history in reading exercises and connecting the activism of African Americans of the past to participants in the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights. The program was later adopted by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1961. King's affiliation with the Citizenship Schools helped them to spread throughout the South. During the period of King's association with the program, nearly fourteen thousand African Americans passed the literacy tests and registered to vote. Through their participation in the program, many African Americans became active in the civil rights movement and helped to mobilize others for political action in the southern United States (Glen 166).

The history of the Citizenship Schools has been seriously neglected in literacy studies; this is unfortunate because we have much to learn about influential U.S. literacy campaigns from other times and other contexts. Few historians have examined literacy campaigns across cultures and historical moments as have Arnove and Graff, and so the common denominators they identify in their work raise interesting issues about the nature of literacy work when it is successful over time and across large populations.

I argue that the Citizenship School Program exhibits the qualities of successful literacy "crusades" historicized by Arnove and Graff. Moreover, the histories of literacy campaigns like the Citizenship Schools need to be included in contemporary literacy studies so that students can explore the pedagogical tenets of these initiatives and their successes and/or failures. The Citizenship Schools are part of composition's "extracurriculum"; they represent one of many sites of literacy work outside of the traditional academy (Gere). As universities work to create liaisons with the larger community through service-learning projects that often incorporate literacy work (Schutz and Gere), literacy campaign history should become a richer and more important part of composition's theoretical base. We should include studies of campaigns such as the Citizenship School Program in graduate courses that take up the history of composition and literacy studies and in undergraduate courses that prepare students to work with others in service-learning partnerships. While the Citizenship School movement took place in another time and outside of a university context, it has a great deal to teach us about how the momentum for service-based literacy initiatives may be informed by and carried out by the individuals the projects aim to serve.

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This essay considers the dramatic achievements of the Citizenship School movement through the lens of Arnove and Graff's study of national literacy campaigns. I argue first that the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954 proved to be a triggering event that offered grassroots African American educators the legal precedent and constitutional affirmation they needed to combat social injustice elsewhere, primarily in the voting system; second, that the very specific goal of achieving literacy for voter registration became the impetus for the campaign and helped to give it an effective focus; third, that Martin Luther King's charismatic connection to the Citizenship

Schools helped literacy workers to mobilize and motivate large numbers of African Americans; and, fourth, that the Citizenship School Workbook adopted a consistent ideological theme that emphasized literacy for voting, for citizenship, and for social transformation. These features of the Citizenship School Program resonate with characteristics of the effective national literacy campaigns that Arnove and Graff identify in their study. Although variations between the Citizenship Schools and other national literacy campaigns certainly exist, Arnove and Graff's categories offer literacy theorists a vehicle for analyzing how literacy work attracts vast numbers of people in a relatively short amount of time and how that labor contributes to social and political transformation.

Throughout this article, it is my goal to attend to concerns that Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams voice in their essay, "History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies." They argue (and I would agree) that African Americans have been permitted to occupy only a very small space in the history of rhetoric and composition—most often as basic or rudimentary writers, or as students who are deficient in certain skills or abilities. Royster and Williams emphasize that these representations have been promoted without critical attention to the larger racist institutional practices that produced a climate in which African Americans could be viewed this way. It is my hope that as a white composition historian, I avoid historicizing that, according to Royster and Williams, generates "a record of misdeeds—exclusions, misrepresentations, negative stereotyping, and non-hearings" (583).

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Background: Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and Educational Activism

Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson were the architects of the Citizenship Schools, the educational and political mobilization that began at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. [1] Originally founded in 1932 to educate labor activists, Highlander is probably best known for its alumna Rosa Parks (who attended seminars there a few weeks before the Montgomery bus boycott). Other African American leaders who taught or attended work-

Esau Jenkins and Myles Horton. Courtesy of Highlander Archives.

shops at Highlander include Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Andrew Young, and Stokeley Carmichael (Levine 90).

Although the remarkable collaboration among Jenkins, Clark, and Robinson was certainly strengthened by the organizational and financial support that came from Highlander, and Highlander may have solidified that collaboration, these three individuals were certainly activists in their own right before they ever attended seminars at the folk school. However, it is their work with the Citizenship School Education Program that secures their place in history, and we simply must provide them the same attention we have given to other activist educators in the United States such as Jane Addams, Myles Horton, A. J. Muste, and others who served disenfranchised people throughout their lives and whose work focused on the relationship between education and social change.

Esau Jenkins was an activist as well as a farmer; he ran a small bus line to help transport Sea Island citizens to the city. He often drove the bus late at night between Johns Island and Charleston, South Carolina, tutoring passen-

Septima Clark and Rosa Parks at Highlander. Courtesy of Highlander Archives.

Bernice Robinson and students, Citizenship School Education Program. Courtesy of Highlander Archives.

gers on board so that they could pass the voter registration literacy test. A visible leader in the community, Jenkins was president of the PTA, assistant pastor of his church, and a member of the Charleston NAACP executive board. He headed the Johns Island Citizens' Club, a two-hundred-member organization working on school and community improvement. In addition to this community service work, Jenkins was chair of the Progressive Club, a group he organized in the late 1940s to provide legal aid to African Americans (Glen 158). Jenkins believed that if citizens on Johns Island could register to vote, they could better address the poverty and other social problems faced by members of the community. While attending the 1954 United Nations Workshop at Highlander, Jenkins convinced the staff to finance a night school for adults if he could find a teacher and a location for the program. He nurtured his idea for the project and sought the partnership of a childhood friend, educator Septima Clark.

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Septima Clark was born in Charleston in 1898, the second of eight children. Her father was a former slave who supported his family as a janitor and caterer, and her mother was a laundress who had spent most of her childhood in Haiti. All eight children completed high school and two went on to college. Between 1929 and 1946 Clark earned a bachelor's degree from Benedict College and a master's degree from Hampton Institute. She began teaching on Johns Island in 1916, and later went on to a long career teaching in the Charleston school system. In 1954, after she and Jenkins attended the United Nations Workshop at Highlander, the two began to collaborate on a literacy program that would empower citizens from Jenkins's Sea Island region to pass the voter registration tests. Clark had long been an elementary school teacher in Charleston, but in 1956 she was fired because she refused to resign her membership in the NAACP (Clark 36). Although she had no experience in adult education, Clark eventually became the director of the integration workshops at Highlander and would hold various administrative posts at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and at Highlander through the 1970s.

The woman who taught classes in the first Citizenship School was Clark's cousin, Bernice Robinson. A beautician and a dressmaker, Robinson was a native of Charleston who had long been active in the local civil rights movement. She was born in 1914, the last of nine children. Her family had a reputation for community service, which included providing food for others and tutoring children in the neighborhood. She was an active member of the NAACP

and her hair salon provided an independent base for leadership in this organization. If new NAACP recruits were fearful of losing their jobs, she suggested that they have their NAACP literature mailed to her house. In 1954, at the suggestion of her cousin, Septima Clark, Robinson attended an integrated workshop at Highlander. As the plans for the first Citizenship School developed, it became increasingly apparent that Robinson would make a good teacher for the first group of Citizenship School students; Horton and Jenkins believed that Robinson's lack of teaching experience would lessen the social distance between her and those in her class. Robinson was eventually persuaded to teach the first students although she was quite reluctant to do so (Glen 162). In a highly effective partnership, Robinson worked with Clark to develop most of the pedagogical materials that would shape the curriculum in the days and months to come.

Brown v. Board of Education and the Birth of the Citizenship Schools

Arnove and Graff observe that most grand-scale literacy campaigns are made possible by "a profound, if not cataclysmic, triggering event: a religious reformation or a political revolution [. . .]" (593). These theorists point to German, Swedish, and Scottish campaigns from the middle of the sixteenth century and suggest that these literacy initiatives "were intimately connected to the Protestant Reformations and the subsequent Catholic Counter-Reformation" (593–94). In the United States, in the middle of the twentieth century, it was not a religious reformation but a political revolution that moved forward as a result of the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the United States. Scholars and historians mark the 1954 case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* as a crucial turning point, and its impact on the Citizenship Schools was dramatic.

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When the *Brown* decision was announced, donations poured into Highlander Folk School to aid the institution's work on desegregation in the South. In April of 1953, the Highlander Executive Council decided that the staff should initiate workshops that promoted school desegregation. This new orientation boosted black participation at Highlander. By the summer of 1954, half of the residential students were African Americans (Levine 90). In August of that same year, Highlander Folk School sponsored a series of United Nations Workshops. These meetings emphasized the economic problems of the South and

the role the United Nations could play in helping to solve them (Glen 158). The workshops were attended by a number of farmers, trade unionists, educators, college students, and civic leaders. Their major purpose was to promote greater understanding among black and white southerners who aspired to improve race relations in their communities (133). Based on the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights and its goal to improve the "equality and dignity of man" throughout the world, participants wanted to collaborate with people of various races and backgrounds in their communities. School desegregation emerged as a central concern of all the participants, but Jenkins, who had been invited to the workshop by Clark, felt that the most urgent need in his own community was to help his neighbors learn to read and write so that they could register to vote.

Jenkins therefore sought funding from Highlander Folk School for his project of literacy instruction in the Sea Island region. Highlander functioned as a financial supporter of projects proposed to them by individual community members. The folk school was in a position to fund Jenkins's project because Highlander received an overwhelming number of donations from foundations and individuals who wanted to contribute to Highlander's work on integration after the *Brown* decision was announced.

At the time, the *Brown* case provided hope that the federal government would finally move against Jim Crow and racial inequality. In 1954, the Supreme Court signaled that the federal government would attempt to enforce the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution that already guaranteed all African Americans their full rights as citizens in the United States. Scholars such as Catherine Prendergast have pointed to the disappointing period after *Brown,* noting that "the reality of racism in the United States was never fully recognized in the rhetoric of *Brown* or in ensuing antidiscrimination measures, nor were the educational opportunities of African Americans improved as they should have been as a result of litigation" (3). Prendergast investigates the many unfulfilled promises of *Brown* as she argues that the ruling reinforced traditional conceptions of literacy as white property to be controlled and disseminated by an empowered majority. She observes that twenty-first-century literacy ideology continues to exert and "maintain inequities along racial lines" and that a civil rights backlash is evident in challenges to affirmative action in higher education, in the loss of historically black colleges and institutions, and in widespread standardized testing that reinforces problematic assumptions about literacy (3).

When it was first announced, however, the *Brown* decision unleashed a concentrated burst of energy by African Americans and their white allies to raise the country to the mark set by the Supreme Court. Some African American historians, such as James T. Patterson, stress that without this decision there might not have been a successful Montgomery bus boycott or other kinds of significant mobilization in the African American community (221). In the case of the Citizenship Schools, the *Brown* decision appears to have had a dramatic impact on the nature of the projects initiated by Highlander Folk School to address the issue of segregation in the United States.

The First Citizenship School Opens on Johns Island

For several years after the UN workshops, Jenkins, Clark, and Horton planned the first Citizenship School, which opened in 1957 in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The Sea Islands extend south from Charleston and include Johns, Edisto, and Daufuskie islands. Although in 1956 the population of Johns Island was nearly 67 percent black, there were only two hundred African Americans registered on the island and few of them voted. Four years later, as a result of the Citizenship School Education Program, there were some seven hundred African Americans registered and voter turnout on the island was almost 100 percent (Glen 166). As the Citizenship Schools spread throughout Charleston County, students who learned to read and write went on to hold classes in their homes and to attract other community members to teach classes and increase the numbers of those who could vote.

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On January 7, 1957, Robinson met with the first group of fourteen students on Johns Island. A building for the school had been purchased with money from Highlander and remodeled by the Progressive Club, a community organization on the island. Robinson announced to her students on the first night of classes that she was not a teacher, that they would all learn together (Glen 162). Initially, to teach the first class, Robinson brought materials with her that had been given to her by a relative who was an elementary school teacher. However, she soon realized that these materials were too unsophisticated for this group of adults. Instead, she asked her students what they wanted to gain from the course. The people said they wanted to learn to read the Bible and the newspaper and to write letters to their families. In addition, they wanted to fill out catalogue and money orders. Most of all, they wanted to pass the literacy

test and register to vote. The group decided to meet two hours a night, two nights a week, for two or three months (Robinson 3).

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Together, Robinson and Clark worked to create a course of study that incorporated the desires of students in the adult literacy program. It is clear that, from the very start, both women understood the importance of allowing participants to help to generate the curriculum. Clark had this to say of the course design:

> I found out that you don't tell people what to do. You let them tell you what they want done and then you have to have in your mind certain things that you feel they need to do. And so you get their thoughts and wind your thoughts around them [. . .] but if you have a cut-and-dry program for them, you'll lose out every time. (Qtd. in Levine 133–34)

Listening to the needs of the adult students in the first classes was clearly a crucial aspect of the pedagogy and consequent success of the Citizenship Schools. According to Robinson, "The Citizenship School's curriculum which was used over the eleven southern states grew out of the expressed needs of the people with whom I worked in that first class" (Robinson 17). An integral part of the Highlander School philosophy was that people from various communities must not be given a complete agenda by outsiders, but must help to generate it on their own.

Robinson made the students' life stories and experiences a central focus of the classes. Much of what she did as she worked with her adult students prefigured "whole language methods" used in the 1960s and 1970s. "I started off," Robinson explained,

> with things that were familiar with them. They were working in the fields and I'd have them tell me stories about what they did out in the fields and what they had in their homes. I'd write these stories out and work with them on the words. I'd say now, "This is your story. We're going to learn how to read your story." (17–18)

Robinson stressed that the life experiences of the adult students were essential components of the community-oriented goals of the Citizenship School. She reminded students that they had raised children and run farms: by emphasizing their expertise in other arenas, Robinson helped to build students' sense that literacy and community activism were two more challenges that they could meet successfully.

"Each Man Get a Man": The Goal of Literacy and the African American Vote

Unlike other literacy programs that advocated literacy solely for the sake of self-improvement, the Citizenship Schools were driven by the very specific goal of voter registration and the social responsibilities of citizenship. Arnove and Graff note that influential literacy campaigns are often carried out in a climate of urgency and focus. As they explain, "The transformations that provide the context for most mass literacy campaigns usually embrace the formation of a new type of person in a qualitatively different society" (595). In the era after *Brown,* Robinson and Clark explicitly articulated a role for African Americans in their packet of literacy materials, with frequent references to citizens who come forward to vote out segregationists and participate in community-specific activism. Robinson and Clark speak of African Americans determined not to be turned away from the polls, emphasizing, again and again, the relationship between literacy, voting, and "first-class citizenship." In the reading and writing exercises, the materials stress the power of voting to change an unjust and segregated society. The following excerpt from one reading exercise called "The Bible and the Ballot" equates spiritual labor with citizenship work:

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> The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> Because he has anointed me to preach Good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives [. . .]
> To set at liberty those who are oppressed.
> *(Luke 4:18, qtd. in Robinson and Clark 29)*

The selection makes comparisons between what the text calls "the public work of Jesus" and the literacy volunteers of the Citizenship Schools. Given the role the black church has played in the history of civil rights, it should not be surprising that biblical rhetoric and political rhetoric are merged in this context. According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, more secular organizations such as the NAACP or the National Urban League were often founded with the help and support of black church leaders; their religious rhetoric infiltrated the very heart and soul of these organizations and added to their persuasive power (9).

With frequent reminders of the goal of literacy for voter registration, the architects of the Citizenship School Program stressed to participants the urgency and focus of their endeavors. Another portion of this reading exercise

emphasizes the social transformation that will occur "if each is concerned about the well-being of his neighbor and if each votes for persons who share these same human ideals" (Robinson and Clark 29). Literacy is continually linked to the pursuit of voting and the social transformation of the United States:

> In America we change things through the ballot. The Constitution allows each man a vote for what he thinks to be the right way. In 1870 the fifteenth amendment was passed which gave all men the right to vote, regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude. Now if we want justice, freedom, peace, and equal rights, we must vote for people who will consider these things important. Every election is a chance to vote for good. (29)

Portions of the booklet highlight organizational aspects necessary to mobilize this constituency for voter registration, the primary motivation for the program. Worksheets ask participants to collect valuable information from their friends and neighbors as they practice writing. Students were asked to write the answers to some of the following questions as they sought to plan a voter registration campaign: *"What is the size of the Negro population in your area? What are the numbers of registered voters? What is the number of Volunteer Workers you will need? What other organizations can you get to take part in the drive?"* (4). Like other practical elements of literacy instruction, the voter registration section of the packet invites students to create a relationship between literacy and community action. In another portion of the booklet, students receive additional organizational information, such as how to hold block party meetings in their homes.

These documents provide evidence of the "Each man get a man" motto that was an integral part of the Citizenship Schools recruitment strategy. The urgency of this slogan as well as the ways in which Robinson and Clark characterize literacy as a weapon against social injustice help to define the battle against illiteracy. One selection in the packet contains lyrics from a historic gospel song: "We are soldiers, in the army. / We've got to fight although we have to cry. / We've got to hold up the bloodstained banner, / We've got to hold it up until we die" (32). Through reading exercises like this one, Clark and Robinson worked to solidify an army of African Americans who could combat the collective racism that each of them had experienced individually. Indeed, it appears that Robinson and Clark built and maintained an "army of literacy workers" through their pedagogical

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materials. Arnove and Graff point to similar unifying characterizations of tutors in twentieth-century campaigns in other parts of the world:

> [L]iteracy workers have been variously designated as *kultarmeitsy* (cultural soldiers) in the Soviet Union and as *brigadistas* (brigade workers) in the Cuban and Nicaraguan campaigns. Posters and billboards portray literacy workers as fighting a war with pencils, blackboards, and notebooks as [. . .] weapons against the "dark forces" of ignorance. (603)

The community-building spirit of the literacy materials urged Citizenship School participants to see their efforts within a larger context. By stressing to literacy workers the power of the vote to challenge segregation in the United States, the architects of the Citizenship School Program gave the campaign a passionate and persuasive focus that resonated consistently throughout the workbook they designed.

Mobilizing Vast Numbers: The Charisma of King

As the number of Citizenship Schools in South Carolina increased and greater numbers of students were enlisted to become literacy tutors themselves, the program began to attract the attention of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. For two years before the SCLC took over the Citizenship Schools in 1961, Clark urged King to adopt the project. King was initially quite reluctant to take on the venture; nevertheless, Clark convinced him that the Citizenship Schools had done more than the SCLC to increase voter registration. Once King and the SCLC lent support to the Citizenship Schools, the result proved to be as dramatic as the initial impetus given to the program by the *Brown* decision. In the first year of the program's affiliation with the SCLC—1961—there would be enough Citizenship Schools in the South to offer literacy training to over twenty thousand African Americans (Glen 169–70).

Although the program certainly expanded without the influence of King, his charismatic affiliation with the Citizenship Schools should not be underestimated. Arnove and Graff acknowledge that in all the major twentieth-century literacy initiatives, as in the campaigns of the previous three centuries, charismatic figures have played an important role in effective literacy outreach. They stress the importance of individuals who helped to draw vast numbers of people to literacy work, including early Protestant reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox:

> The stature of these figures and the symbols that they represent to their followers are tied to notions of salvation, redemption, recreation. Notions attached to the saving of individual souls in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods of Western Europe, and the common school "crusade" of the nineteenth-century United States, become linked in the twentieth century (especially the post–World War II period) to the goals of redemption of a society [. . .]. (603)

Like that of Luther, Calvin, and Knox, King's presence helped to give the Citizenship Schools the urgency of a crusade. King's image and his words are very much a part of the ideology of the Citizenship School packet. In a foreword to the Citizenship School literacy materials, King is shown in a photograph meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy about voting problems in the Deep South. King writes, "One of the basic weapons in the fight against prejudice and loss of human rights is education. The fine edge on that weapon is understanding" (Robinson and Clark 1). In another photograph, King sits with a group of African American literacy workers. One of the reading selections included in the packet is called "The Power of Non-Violence," and it asks participants to consider King's work as a model for working to change racist practices through the vote. The passage draws on the Bible and the history of Gandhi's work in India, but the heart of the selection centers on King and his ability to mobilize others in the practice of nonviolence:

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> The idea of non-violence first received widespread attention in the United States when a young Baptist minister, The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., led the people of Montgomery, Alabama in a non-violent protest against discourtesy and segregation on the busses of that city. These people walked to work for 381 days to demonstrate the fact that they were tired of being cursed and abused on the busses. Though their homes and churches were bombed, though they were thrown into prison, they did not strike back. They won the respect of the entire world and many of their oppressors, because they refused to be dragged down to the level of animal hatred and violence. (23)

Following the passage are fill-in-the blank questions dedicated to reading comprehension, and a list of vocabulary words is included at the bottom of the page. King's presence in the literacy materials is a powerful force for organization, and his affiliation with the Citizenship Schools appears to have been an important feature for attracting others to the campaign.

Ideology and the Citizenship School Workbook

It is evident that the course materials in the SCLC packet were clearly designed for members of the African American community who were facing struggles due to a racist educational system and a lack of educational opportunities. The booklet, only thirty-eight pages long, comprises an interesting collection of instructional exercises, including reading-comprehension passages on topics such as "The Power of Non-Violence," "The Bible and the Ballot," African American "Heroes of the Past," and the lyrics from old Negro spirituals such as "Wade in the Water" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" These selections share a common theme of African American community building around a specific goal—civil rights.

Present in these materials is an idealized view of literacy as a tool for social progress and transformation. Literacy is equated with power, with a state of grace, to use Sylvia Scribner's terms. But we have come to understand that literacy is complicated and is unlikely by itself to be the primary impetus for significant and lasting economic or social change (75–78). Reading the ideological framework of the Citizenship School Workbook in terms of J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* is perhaps as sobering as reading Prendergast's analysis of educational inequality fifty years after *Brown*. Stuckey argues that literacy cannot deliver on naive promises perpetuated in a climate where no attention is given to economic injustice and other problems that create the real divisions between rich and poor in the United States. It is particularly cruel, Stuckey insists, to suggest to those who suffer most that literacy alone can eliminate the disenfranchisement so many literates and illiterates experience in this country.

Despite a romanticized view of literacy evident in the Citizenship School workbook, the text offers a sharp critique of the white supremacist educational structure and its perpetuation of substandard education for African Americans.

Even so, at the time of the Citizenship Schools, literacy, or the lack thereof, stood between many African Americans and voter registration. Given the situation, literacy had to be imbued with a particular power, however idealistic. Despite a romanticized view of literacy evident in the Citizenship School workbook, the text offers a sharp critique of the white supremacist educational structure and its perpetuation of substandard education for African Americans. A particularly intriguing feature of the Citizenship School instructional booklet is its introduction, which highlights some of the reasons for high illiteracy rates in the African American community. The implicit assumption in this text is that adult Citizenship School participants might be ashamed and embarrassed

about their inability to read and write. The introduction emphasizes that most African American illiteracy results from a white supremacist educational structure that has long contributed to deplorable learning conditions for African Americans: "For many years Negroes were forced to suffer in broken down school buildings. [. . .] The building had a few lights, many broken windows, and a scratched up black board. The teachers did the best they could, but it is a miracle that any of us learned anything" (Robinson and Clark 5). In this introduction, the African American architects of the Citizenship School Program highlight the ways in which adult illiteracy becomes a consequence of larger institutional and social failings. By suggesting that given the rundown state of schools and poor conditions for teaching, "it is a miracle that any of us learned anything," educators were able to highlight the importance of literacy and the power of voting to change these and other unjust situations.

Perhaps one of the most compelling historical components of the instructional packet is a collection of reading selections called "Heroes of the Past." These pieces showcase African American activists who made a political contribution to U.S. history. There are biographical profiles of Crispus Attucks, Sojourner Truth, Benjamin Banneker, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Each of these narratives highlights the courageous service of African Americans. But just as important as the reclaiming of the African American historical figures and their contributions to U.S. history are the ways that illiteracy is defined as a community problem instead of an individual one.

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The Mary McLeod Bethune narrative illustrates how these short biographical essays on the lives of African Americans connected their plight to that of the Citizenship School participants. Bethune describes her own educational challenges this way: "My limited educational advantages," she explains, "can be seen in all struggling boys and girls" (Robinson and Clark 27). Like the introduction in the course reader, Bethune's narrative emphasizes that there are many reasons that numerous African Americans have found it difficult to obtain educational opportunities. By linking Bethune's plight to that of so many others—by recovering lost history—this narrative works rhetorically to include the individual in a communal history, offering an implicit critique of whites who withhold literacy from blacks. The narrative relays Bethune's first encounter with racist constructions of literacy. As a child on a plantation, Bethune wanders one day into the white children's playhouse, and picks up a book only to have it snatched away by a white child who says, "Put down that book! You

can't read!" When Bethune explains that she has no plans to hurt the book, the white girl replies angrily: "Books are for people who can read!" This selection emphasizes the importance of this moment in Bethune's life. As she considers the inequities between whites and blacks, Bethune comes to the conclusion that "[i]t must be the reading and writing" that makes the difference. The profile in the Citizenship School booklet tells of Bethune's rise through service work, her founding of schools such as the Daytona-Cookman Collegiate Institute, and her ascent to the positions of advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt and administrator of the Office of Minority Affairs of the National Youth Administration.

A portion of the narrative emphasizes Bethune's return in 1950 to visit the school she had attended sixty years before. The narrative reveals how Bethune "[s]hook her aged head. There was much yet to be done! Unequal educational opportunities, inadequate housing and poverty!" Remembering the episode in the playhouse when she was a child, Bethune prays that "the day may come when no child anywhere in the world will have to flinch under the stinging words 'Put down that book, You can't read!'" (28). In this section, literacy wields a rescuing power that is connected to community progress, service, and social transformation. With her education, Bethune goes on to make a career—not of individual rewards, but of service to other African Americans.

The consistent ideological emphasis on service in the Citizenship School workbook resonates with characteristics of many mid-twentieth century campaigns that have more than literacy as a goal. Arnove and Graff note that numerous campaigns of the twentieth century refer to literacy, not as an end itself, but as a means to other achievements:

> [L]iteracy is almost never itself an isolated or absolute goal. It is rather one part of a larger process *and* a vehicle for that process. Literacy is invested with a special significance, but seldom in and of itself. Learning to read, possibly to write, involves the acquisition or conferral of a new status—membership in a religious community, citizenship in a nation-state [. . .]. The attainment of literacy per se operates as a badge, a sign of initiation into a select group and/or a larger community. (596)

Clearly, in the context of the Citizenship Schools, literacy operates as a badge of citizenship and much more: the acquisition of literacy comes with a particular responsibility—service to others who do not possess the ability to read or write. The reading exercises in the literacy packet stress the theme of service to others. From the pervasive slogan of the Citizenship Schools, "Each

Man Get a Man," to the service-oriented themes of the reading exercises, the literacy materials never deviate far from a message that comes round again and again: Gain literacy to pass the test and vote, then find someone else and teach him or her to read.

Unlike earlier campaigns described by Arnove and Graff that stressed a religious ideology and limited texts to an overarching religious purpose, one of the most distinctive features of twentieth-century campaigns is their emphasis on a message of liberation and service. While Clark and Robinson certainly employ many rote or mechanical means of teaching and learning, these cannot be viewed in isolation from the message embedded in these materials. Almost no reading exercise, vocabulary word, or question about the reading is neutral or arbitrary in its placement in the workbook; reminders about the relationship between literacy and the power to change unjust situations resonate repeatedly throughout the text.

Passage of the Voting Rights Act: A New Direction for the Citizenship Schools

In the early 1960s, the program moved into the deepest and most dangerous parts of the South, into Alabama and Mississippi. Bernice Robinson was asked to recruit students and train teachers in this region. Septima Clark became the director of workshops and Andrew Young, later mayor of Atlanta and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, directed the Citizenship Schools after they were taken on by the SCLC. Young worked with Clark at a new headquarters for the schools at Dorchester Center, Georgia, and the program continued to expand (Branch 576). Clark, Young, and others traveled throughout Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee on recruitment trips. The majority of the people who received training to become Citizenship School teachers were either novices to the movement or activists whose involvement was relatively recent. But a small minority had teaching experience that prepared them to be educators in this program. From 1962 to 1965 the annual number of teachers trained ranged from four hundred to five hundred. In 1964, Clark reported that there were 195 schools in operation in all eleven Southern states; this was a number that would fluctuate after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Levine 236).

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which outlawed the literacy test as a requirement for voter registration. After the passage of this legislation, the Citizenship School movement turned more to the study of government and politics, although literacy remained an important part of the

curriculum (Levine 262). But funding for the program decreased, as the Marshall Field Foundation, a major sponsor, encouraged the SCLC to find matching funds elsewhere. The assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 further compromised the program. In the wake of this tragedy and the floundering leadership of the SCLC, the Citizenship Schools lost direction and guidance. While Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins would continue to be active members of the civil rights movement, the historic program they had helped to found closed its doors in 1970.

The Legacy of the Citizenship Schools

It would be naive, certainly, to try to suggest that the history of the Citizenship Schools represents a tale of literacy easily obtained and translated into voting power. It would be historically negligent to fail to acknowledge the fact that whites found ways to thwart voter registration of African Americans, literate or not. Sadly, the attainment of literacy did not solve all the voting ills or remove all of the racist obstacles whites used to block the black vote in the South. Indeed, as increasing numbers of African Americans passed the tests, whites imposed harsher and more violent restrictions.

It is, however, fair to say that the Citizenship Schools made an important contribution to the civil rights movement in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By directing the program at a specific constituency—African American adults—for a specific purpose—voter registration and citizenship—this program succeeded in creating a population of voters who might have failed to pass the literacy test and remained in political isolation instead of becoming part of the civil rights movement.

While historians who write about the civil rights movement have made the Citizenship Schools part of that momentous history, literacy specialists and educational historians have neglected the legacy of this important program.

While historians who write about the civil rights movement have made the Citizenship Schools part of that momentous history, literacy specialists and educational historians have neglected the legacy of this important program, which boasts successes greater than those of other well-known literacy initiatives. Septima Clark estimated that the level of literacy achieved by the Adult Education Program in 140 hours and the Laubach Program in 98 hours was achieved by Citizenship School students in about 80 hours. Many of those associated with the program felt that this success was due to the radical affirmation of students' dignity, the goal of voter registration, and the use of community people as teachers (Levine 135). In terms of this success alone, it

appears that the history of this campaign would be of interest to literacy theorists and educational historians.

But how can the legacy of this remarkable literacy campaign speak to those of us who teach and work in the twenty-first century? How might the story of the Citizenship Schools be incorporated into histories of composition studies and preparation for literacy work in service-learning programs? As universities seek to create more extensive liaisons between academe and the larger community, we must improve service-oriented literacy projects. Educators within composition studies have played a major role in the development of service-learning at the university level, and in many instances literacy outreach has been a central component in service-learning programs. Despite the general enthusiasm for and expansion of service-learning efforts, however, scholars note the problems that emerge in service-oriented endeavors, particularly in situations where student tutors have not been adequately trained or community participants have not been permitted a voice in the negotiation of service projects that purport to benefit them. In "Composition Studies and Service Learning: Appealing to Communities?" Kevin Ball and Amy M. Goodburn explain that while much of composition's literature on service-learning calls for reciprocity and community empowerment, the value of service-learning is still primarily argued to a peer/professional audience, rather than to the community or public being served:

The Citizenship Schools represent only a small portion of the activist tradition of literacy education we have yet to uncover.

> The discourse of composition in general emphasizes how students benefit from service learning—usually in terms of how their belief systems change or the ways that their writing changes—but there is not much discussion of what community members learn from these encounters. Do they continue their lives unchanged? If not, how do they articulate the benefits? (82)

While many literacy-based service-learning projects are informed by contemporary literacy theory, histories of service-oriented literacy work have not been viewed as theoretically significant in educating students who work with members of the community.

The inclusion of such histories in relevant courses might allow us to answer questions integral to effective service-learning: What attitudes did those who founded literacy programs bring to their work? How did complex interpersonal dynamics aid or detract from literacy work in the community? Were "those served" asked to participate in a vision of the program? Were they con-

sulted about how well they thought the program worked? While it has been somewhat difficult to locate narratives from participants in the Citizenship School Program, the level of participation and the massive involvement of huge numbers alone suggest that literacy students were not passive participants, but active members of a program in which they were encouraged to take an important role, helping the program to grow by moving from the position of *student* to *literacy tutor* to *activist* over time.

The Citizenship Schools represent only a small portion of the activist tradition of literacy education we have yet to uncover. We still know very little about the ways in which individuals who were pushed to the margins of our educational system, in various historical moments, learned to read and write. Even so, the history of the Citizenship School Program reminds us that there was activist education in the United States before there was a theoretical body of work circulating around terms we now know through Paulo Freire and others as "critical pedagogy" and "liberatory education." Perhaps we know so little about programs such the Citizenship Schools because they operated outside the boundaries of traditional educational institutions, in the extracurricular region of composition and literacy. The legacy of the Citizenship Schools and other literacy initiatives like it represent an important chapter in our understanding of how those individuals who did not have access to mainstream education learned to read and write within the context of larger political and social goals.

We must rely on the history of past literacy campaigns to inform our collective pedagogical imagination for the sake of students we may work with inside and outside of the contemporary university.

While the commitment to diversity in education in the present moment has become a national priority, and terms such as "critical pedagogy" and "multicultural education" are part of the discourse of contemporary educational debates, literacy history in its various forms has not yet surfaced as a way to shape our responses to new pedagogical problems. We must rely on the history of past literacy campaigns to inform our collective pedagogical imagination for the sake of students we may work with inside and outside of the contemporary university. If we value the link between civic action and the word, then we need to give literacy initiatives like the Citizenship Schools more scholarly attention so that we can create a better understanding of the ways in which diverse groups of people have used writing and speaking instruction, throughout history, for politically and socially transformative ends.

Note

1. This legendary folk school and its founder, white Tennessean Myles Horton, have been the subject of numerous documentaries made by filmmakers such as Elia Kazan and journalists such as Bill Moyers. Horton based Highlander on the idea of Danish folk schools, a mode of adult education in Denmark (Glen 55). The Danish folk schools began as a plan to restore Denmark's economic prosperity, social stability, and national pride after suffering a defeat in a war with Prussia and Austria in 1864–65. According to David Whisnant, by 1920 the folk schools were widely credited with improvements in agricultural practices and the growth of intellectual activity and political participation among the rural poor of Denmark (Whisnant 128–29). Their success inspired the formation of similar schools throughout Scandinavia and attracted considerable attention among adult educators in the United States.

Horton made a study of the history of these schools and adapted many of the concepts in his creation of Highlander Folk School. From 1932 until his death in 1990, Horton worked to create educational opportunities for disenfranchised adults who could then use what they learned to organize others and help to solve the problems of segregation and poverty in the South (Horton).

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