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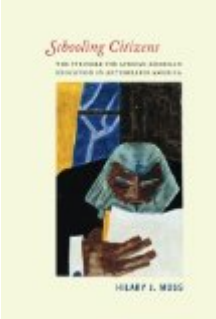
Hilary J. Moss. *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xv + 274 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-10298-6.



Reviewed by Mary Niall Mitchell

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Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan (University of Western Ontario)

For anyone following the current debates over public schooling in the United States, what Hillary Moss writes in the conclusion to her study of African American education in the early nineteenth century will strike a chord. Even in the earliest years of common school education, "public schools were the most local of institutions," rooted within neighborhoods and communities, and also "the most national" (p. 196). Struggles and debates over access to public schools in the first half of the nineteenth century, as Moss ably demonstrates, were shaped by local circumstances and local economies, yet they centered on contested notions of national citizenship, that is, on "who--and who could not--claim American identity" (p. 196).

If today the debates seem to pivot primarily on how to promote equal education within the nation's public schools (rather than on access to public schools, as they often did in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth), they are still playing out on both local and national fronts. They are community struggles (think of ongoing reform efforts in inner-city school systems in New York or New Orleans, for instance) with profound implications for the nation's future. At their core, they are akin to the antebellum struggles for African American education because they are (still) about which groups can claim a quality education and which ones will be left behind.

The historical question that frames this book, in the author's words, is "why public schooling and white opposition to African American education expanded simultaneously" (p. 3). The answer, in part, is that public schools, from their earliest incarnation, were an important means for different groups of Americans to lay claim to citizenship, and that citizenship was, by the early nineteenth century, something to be debated in racial as well as class terms. For free African Americans, who in many places had begun to lose voting rights, the education of their children was a means to argue for inclusion as citizens. By the same token, those who wanted to define American citizenship for whites only, hoped to block access to schooling in order to exclude blacks from

the body politic. This struggle was becoming ever more heated over the course of the nineteenth century, as gradual emancipation and immigration in the North forced open the debate over the political and social boundaries of the nation's citizenry. As Moss asserts: "The common school movement ... empowered white children, regardless of their religion or ethnicity, to claim citizenship, but it also reinforced white efforts to withhold civil rights from African Americans" (p. 13).

Moss has chosen to approach her subject geographically, focusing on three antebellum cities that adopted common school systems relatively early: New Haven, Baltimore, and Boston. But as the author points out, region only partially explains the differences in the schooling of African American students in those three cities. Other factors--including the demands of labor markets, the process of emancipation, as well as evolving ideas about race, citizenship, and American identity--must be considered carefully.

In Connecticut, a state that prior to the nineteenth century had been supportive of universal education, the move towards gradual emancipation stirred white opposition to black schooling. According to Moss, "no northern state witnessed more upheaval over African American schooling in the antebellum period" (p. 18). In particular, the shift away from colonization movements and towards abolitionism redefined the purpose of schools for blacks from one that would prepare them to return to Africa and "towards their potential to advance black people's civil liberties at home" (p. 19). Hostilities reached a new pitch, however, in the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia in 1831. Interracial efforts to establish a college for African Americans in New Haven ran head-on into the hysteria against educated blacks that Turner's rebellion inspired. Local newspaper editorials seized upon Turner's literacy as a marker of the dangers of black education. "Turner's last casualty," Moss writes, " was to be the first African college" (p. 62).

One might expect to see even greater opposition in a city like Baltimore, where slavery had yet to be abolished and coexisted with the nation's largest free black population. Yet the economic importance of that population (some 25,000 souls by 1850) translated into a fairly tolerant atmosphere in which African Americans could build schools for their children "that did not, at least overtly challenge the racial order" (p. 69). Moss uses apprenticeship contracts as well as census records to point up the importance of free black labor in Baltimore--particularly that of free black men with a modicum of learning who could work in bookshops or at newspaper offices. (Free black women, who were more often hired for domestic labor, were also more likely to be illiterate.)

The value of free black labor, to whites, "fostered a climate conducive to African American literacy" (p. 69). Unlike black children in New Haven and Boston, their counterparts in Baltimore were excluded from the city's public schools entirely. Yet free black men and women successfully organized fairs to raise money for church-run schools. These activists also launched several attempts to exempt free blacks from the school tax, since their children were unable to attend the city's public schools. Despite their failure to convince the legislature of the injustice of the tax, the challenges to the law were testament their organizational strength, as well as to the support of some prominent members of the white community--those, the author points out, who as employers had the most to gain from an educated free black population.

Perhaps more so than in any other antebellum American city, the citizens of Boston viewed common schools as essential to the greater good, particularly in the aftermath of the Revolution. It seemed at first that perhaps black Bostonians would benefit from this enthusiasm for public education, but in practice, it soon became clear that only with the formation of a separate "African" school would black children receive the benefits

of schooling. According to Moss, "Bostonians' loyalty to the promise of public schooling broke down in the face of their discomfort with racial integration" (p. 132). When, in the 1830s, the city's school committee tried to build a schoolhouse for black children that would be on par with white schools, "whites lobbied the mayor and city council to locate [it] in any neighborhood but their own" (p. 139).

The ideology of common schools, as promoted by Horace Mann and others, was, according to Moss, inherently opposed to equal education for blacks and whites. Education reformers argued for support of public schools as a way to produce active citizens and a highly trained working class. But since blacks were excluded from the body politic and most of the skilled labor force, neither argument necessitated the education of black children, and certainly did not dictate the same quality of education for blacks as for whites.

And yet, it was in Boston that a strong movement for school desegregation arose by the mid-1840s. African American leaders, such as William C. Nell, framed their fight for integration in terms of their rightful place as citizens of the republic and hence the right of their children to attend schools alongside white children. Such arguments were particularly strident in light of the recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, which electrified Boston and energized the city's free black population to assert and defend their rights as free people. By 1855, the movement to integrate the city's public schools had succeeded, albeit in the cold shadow of the ***Dred Scott*** decision a year earlier that had denied African Americans a claim to citizenship.

Although Moss's book is not, strictly speaking, a history of children or childhood, it does what the best studies of childhood can do, which is to point up the importance of children and their education to the ways in which Americans fought to define citizenship and nation, and to the racial politics that were a central part of those struggles. What could easily have been written as an institutional history of education in the nineteenth century is instead a meditation on these larger themes. One might wish that the black students at the heart of these struggles could be more visible in the narrative--they were certainly visible to the parties on all sides of the education debate--but as a study in ideology and political culture, Moss's treatment is an important addition to the long history of struggle for African American education in the United States.

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