


---


Reviewed by Ronald L. Pitcock, Texas Christian University

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige’s 2004 remarks celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* sounded more political than celebratory. Issued six days before the 17 May anniversary, Paige’s opening lines saluted the Supreme Court’s historic opinion ending racial segregation in public schools. Having attended school in rural, segregated Mississippi, Paige understood the social importance of *Brown*, leading him to note that *Brown* “gave every student in America a seat in the classroom.” Paige’s comments then move quickly away from the epideictic rhetoric characteristic of most *Brown* celebrations. For Paige, the work of *Brown* is incomplete. Whereas many tributes honored the elimination of “separate but equal,” Paige proclaims that separate but unequal schools persist, where “[s]ome students are taught well while the rest—mostly poor and mostly minority—flounder or flunk out.” Though *Brown* put students in seats, the Bush Administration’s *No Child Left Behind* “guarantees each of those students an education” through increased accountability and “academic proficiency.”

Catherine Prendergast’s *Literacy and Racial Justice* addresses in compelling ways the powers shaping instances like Paige’s press release—beliefs informed by a fifty-year historical record of literacy initiatives that failed to achieve racial justice. Indeed, *Brown*’s success in securing equal educational opportunities for all races is limited. School districts continue to use race as a factor in establishing integrated learning environments, individual schools enroll high numbers of minority students in special education programs designed for the mentally or physically challenged, and poor districts with large minority populations have received substantially less funding than schools with predominantly White populations. In states such as Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Florida, court-mandated desegregation plans continue to be challenged. As Prendergast emphasizes throughout, access to literacy through education is essential to White identity: “the ideology of literacy
has been sustained primarily as a response to perceived threats to White property interests, White privilege, the maintenance of ‘White’ identity, or the conception of America as a White nation” (7). Literacy, she argues, has historically been recognized as “White property” throughout American history in its courts, laws, markets, and literacy initiatives. *No Child Left Behind* stands as such an initiative with its battery of standardized tests, mechanical approaches to literacy instruction, and systemic calls for assessment and accountability—all of which use literacy to divide rather than connect. Though Paige expresses great faith in the initiative’s attempt to realize racial justice in the U.S. education system, *No Child Left Behind* seems doomed to repeat the troubling history Prendergast investigates.

Proclaiming *Literacy and Racial Justice* a tour de force underestimates the importance of Prendergast’s work to researchers of literacy, law, race, and composition. Prendergast blends theories from the aforementioned fields to explain how an ideology of literacy—dependent upon a conception of literacy as White property—burdens minorities rather than advancing its stated goal of racial justice. Prendergast examines this ideology’s history and reveals how it has shaped thinking ranging from the courts to public school reform, from foundational research in literacy to Ronald Reagan and the 1980s. What distinguishes further *Literacy and Racial Justice* from many histories of literacy is Prendergast’s investigation of this ideology’s influence on the present; in looking at High School X, the author expands our understanding of how *Brown*’s aftermath continues to inform student literacy practices at an alternative school and hints at the liberating potential of literacy for that school’s teachers and students. Prendergast’s study of the past 50 years—comprehensive, persuasive, and gripping in its story as well as its style—demonstrates how literacy studies is linked closely to countless histories, including but not limited to histories of writing, economics, law, race, pedagogy, democratic citizenship, and national administration. And she argues her point brilliantly, evidenced by the book’s many national awards. During the past year, *Literacy and Racial Justice* has received the W. Ross Winterowd Award, administered by the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition and *JAC: Journal of Advanced Composition*; the MLA’s Mina Shaughnessy Book Award; and the CCCC Outstanding Book Award.

The first two chapters of *Literacy and Racial Justice* demonstrate how courts have historically understood and rhetorically treated literacy as White property. Moreover, Prendergast exposes how players in these debates—judges, lawyers, and school administrators—actually worked to uphold the construction of their own, White-identified literacy. Though she begins with *Brown*, Prendergast traces this ideology of literacy’s development in later 1970s antidiscrimination suits, *Washington v. Davis* (1976) and *The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), cases that helped alienate literacy training from schools. Even though *Brown* awarded access to literacy in the schools to people of all colors, the site for literacy training shifted away from the schools, devaluing that education and promoting “White flight.” *Bakke* serves as a springboard for investigating in
the second chapter how critical race theorists during the late 1980s responded to Brown’s failure. Using literacy in unexpected ways to withstand White identity’s stranglehold on literacy ownership, theorists such as Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams responded more through sharing personal experience than critical analysis. Before Brown, Prendergast points out, African Americans defined themselves as outsiders, believing they could enter excluded sites like schools through the courts and attain both literacy and racial justice; after Brown, “critical race theorists position themselves rhetorically as outsiders in their scholarship to show that the advanced literacy they have acquired still does not in and of itself constitute racial justice” (57).

Prendergast’s third and fourth chapters move away from analyzing legal discourse. In chapter 3, Prendergast revisits the Carolina Piedmont and Shirley Brice Heath in Ways With Words (1983). Here the author works from Heath’s correspondence and notes, now archived at Winthrop University’s Dacus Library, to reread Ways. Heath’s text argues that the cultural and language differences separating two communities—the African American “Trackton” and the white “Roadville”—ultimately cause difficulties for children learning together in desegregated schools. Prendergast rereads closely Heath’s research—an exceptional yet rare ethnographic picture of life after Brown—to understand it “not as chronicle of separate but equal unraced communities but as evidence of the persistence of prejudice,” or more specifically a common belief in White entitlement (64). The shared community of the classroom sustains this belief, for there rules exist “allowing people with certain skin color to dictate the terms of interaction” and make certain “students of color will often be placed in a deeply paradoxical position, learning in an environment where logic is subservient to the maintenance of cultural taboos” (91-92). In her fourth chapter, Prendergast considers the simultaneous debate over literacy at the college level. Documenting how educators took up the cause of racial justice during the 1970s—as in the case of the CCCC resolution The Students’ Right to Their Own Language—the author examines how “the Reagonomics of race and literacy” eliminated issues of race from discussions of literacy, teaching, and education, cementing further the idea of literacy as White property and imagining “the American literate culture . . . as a primarily White one” (119).

In Literacy and American Lives, Deborah Brandt states “literacy needs to be addressed in a civil rights context” (206). Prendergast’s fifth and final chapter, a study of High School X, illustrates this civil rights context while revealing the cost of the history constructed in the first four chapters. Blending archival research, ethnography, and class observation, Prendergast depicts a school where literacy and race influence greatly the school’s distinctive curriculum. In High School X, the curriculum reflects students’ diverse backgrounds and responds to their interests; students can propose courses like “The Juvenile Justice System” and are encouraged by teachers to reject myths like the “Melting Pot” and the “American Dream” while studying history and racial oppression. Students take required courses introducing them to the school’s “harassment-free learning environment.” They take responsibil-
ity for revising school policies on anti-harassment, attendance, and drugs—defining for themselves their school’s system of governance. High School X’s history and rhetoric are constructed around a conception of literacy that “include[s] the pursuit of racial justice” (126).

*Literacy and Racial Justice* speaks to the entire field of composition, not just scholars specializing in the history of U.S. literacy. The text details a history that accounts for racial inequity and explains the ways in which an ideology of literacy continues to inform our students’ literacies. This history, along with Prendergast’s keen analysis of key moments, provides a framework for questioning current calls for assessment and accountability, tools embedded in reform programs with catchy titles like *No Child Left Behind*. Prendergast’s award-winning words remind us that literacy—the writing and reading taught in our classrooms—is linked historically and rhetorically to racial justice, and challenge teacher-writers, as participants in and observers of this history, to do more than call “for tolerance of culturally different literacy practices” (173).

*Fort Worth, TX*

**Works Cited**


Reviewed by Michael J. Salvo and Julie Staggers, Purdue University

Beverly Sauer’s *Rhetoric of Risk* does far more than explore *Technical Documentation in Hazardous Environments*, as her subtitle asserts. Rather, Sauer’s large volume in the Rhetoric, Knowledge, and Society series utilizes research on mines in the U.S., U.K., and South Africa to discuss the purpose of documentation as well as a host of philosophical, ideological, and rhetorical issues involved in the communication of risk and the maintenance of safety in dangerous environments.

Early in the volume, Sauer defines the problem of documenting danger. Individuals are apt to make poor choices, particularly when under the stress of production deadlines or economic pressures asserted by workers or management. Sauer claims, “Agencies write standards because experience is a poor teacher,” a statement that she develops on a number of different levels throughout the book (37). First, Sauer asserts that uninterpreted experience is a poor teacher because