

NeCamp, Samantha. *Adult Literacy & American Identity: The Moonlight Schools & Americanization Programs*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2014. Print.

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In *Adult Literacy & American Identity: The Moonlight Schools & Americanization Programs*, Samantha NeCamp brings together two educational movements that sought to resolve perceived literacy crises in the early twentieth century—the Moonlight Schools that were founded by Cora Wilson Stewart to provide basic literacy training to residents of Appalachia, and the Americanization programs that offered educational opportunities to immigrants. NeCamp draws upon sources ranging from Stewart’s voluminous correspondence held in Special Collections at the University of Kentucky, to textbooks and other pedagogical materials used in classrooms, to the published proceedings of the annual meetings of National Education Association (NEA), to diverse reports issued by state commissions and federal agencies concerned with illiteracy and adult education. More, though, than offering readers a richly contextualized sense of the shared histories of the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs, *Adult Literacy & American Identity* usefully reminds contemporary literacy teachers of how our pedagogical programs and the institutions that support our work do not stand alone and may well be intertwined with a wide range of disparate educational enterprises. With such relationships in mind, NeCamp urges contemporary educators to pay careful attention to how discussions of our work, our qualifications as literacy teachers, and representations of our students enter broader public discourses.

NeCamp opens her study by establishing how literacy became linked with a sense of American-ness at the turn of the twentieth century. She notes that immigration patterns shifted between 1890 and 1910, with an increasing number of new arrivals to the U.S. tracing their roots to southern and eastern Europe. Marked as linguistically and educationally different from native-born U.S. citizens, these newest immigrants prompted both revisions to government policies and a re-mapping of identity based on language rather than country of birth. As NeCamp observes, being literate in English quickly “became a marker of assimilation, worthiness, and American identity, because literacy ‘stood in’ for racial and social difference” (2). Thus, educating immigrants and providing opportunities for them to become literate in English came to be

viewed as an essential tool for expunging difference, supporting democratic processes, and sustaining a unified sense of the nation as a whole.

Even as literacy education was being conjured as a tool for assimilating new immigrants, each decennial census from 1880 to 1910 underscored that native-born whites actually represented the greatest proportion of illiterates in the United States, including the residents of Appalachia (3). Without sacrificing nuance for brevity, NeCamp succinctly traces the paradoxical cultural construction of the Appalachian resident both as an “other” whose untamed, uneducated, and lawless nature marked him or her as different from the modern, rational American citizen and as a direct genealogical and cultural descendant of the nation’s earliest and most revered European settlers. As was the case with newly arriving immigrants, addressing the illiteracy rates of Appalachians thus became an “issue of cultural and racial defense” (9). For NeCamp, the rhetorics of crisis simultaneously surrounding the illiteracy of immigrants and Appalachian residents served as a warrant for placing in dialogue the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs.

In chapter two, NeCamp offers readers a necessary and useful historical overview of the Moonlight Schools and the Americanization movement, and, in doing so, she forecasts the narrative arc of her argument. She begins with the 1911 founding of the Moonlight Schools in Rowan County, Kentucky, where Stewart served as county school superintendent. Under the tutelage of volunteer teachers, Moonlight School students developed basic writing and reading abilities (e.g., signing one’s name and writing checks, deciphering simple sentences and reading short passages related to agrarian life) in just eight weeks. A charismatic leader, Stewart used her success in Rowan County to launch a statewide “crusade” to end illiteracy under the auspices of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission (KIC). Empowered by the adoption of the Moonlight School model in a variety of southern and western states and by the need to provide literacy education to soldiers being mobilized to fight in World War I, Stewart was able to take her crusade to the national stage. In 1918, she was asked to lead the NEA’s Illiteracy Committee, but she became increasingly frustrated as programs to educate immigrants garnered a greater share of public attention and funding (27-28). The professional educators who ran Americanization programs and founded what came to be called the field of adult education resisted both Stewart’s model of volunteer teachers providing students with the most basic abilities to read and write and her crusading rhetoric. Though Stewart successfully lobbied President Herbert Hoover to create a National Advisory Committee on Illiteracy (NACI) in 1929, the committee’s membership included a significant number of professional educators and educational researchers who were able to limit Stewart’s influence on the committee’s work. By 1933, Stewart retired from public life to focus on a

religious avocation, and, according to NeCamp, the vision of literacy education represented in the Moonlight Schools began to fade away (30).

The Americanization movement and the adult education programs it evolved into were far less centrally organized than the Moonlight Schools. Not aligned with a charismatic leader or singular program, opportunities for training in spoken and written English offered to immigrants were sponsored by businesses, including Ford Motor Company, trade unions, social service organizations, and state and city governments in the early decades of the twentieth century (31-35). With the outbreak of World War I came increasing pressure to bureaucratize and standardize literacy education for immigrants under the leadership of trained professionals. Such education was, after all, a matter of national security. But in the aftermath of World War I and with the passage of more restrictive immigration laws, the need for Americanization programs declined precipitously, and newly certified, professional literacy educators, faced an uncertain employment outlook. They thus began to adopt the broader mission of adult education, looking beyond the immigrant population and seeking to provide learning opportunities that were more ambitious than mastering the basic skills of speaking, reading, and writing in English (37-38).

In chapter three, readers have an opportunity to take a close look at the pedagogical agendas of the Moonlight Schools and various Americanization programs. Though both movements were taking up the highly influential ideas of John Dewey and his call for student-centered education, the pedagogical practices of these literacy programs were strikingly different (40). In authoring *The Country Life Readers* and other materials for Moonlight School students, Stewart was committed to creating texts that would capture the interest of beginning adult readers and writers. This is reflected in the topics Stewart chose for lessons (e.g., writing one's own name, new agricultural technologies, and value of creating and supporting civic institutions, like libraries and schools) as well her commitment to the "whole word" method of teaching literacy. Such a whole word approach was often grounded in conversation as the teacher introduced new ideas and new words to the student(s), and there was little concern for standardized spelling (51-53). By contrast, classes offered by many Americanization programs tended to favor phonics, an approach to literacy instruction that required students to develop phonemic awareness and then to understand the correspondence between sounds and spelling patterns. Though phonics instruction is perhaps initially less likely to engage students' interest, many literacy educators working with immigrants believed that this approach provided a necessary foundation so that students could eventually move beyond the basic literacy tasks necessary to secure employment as manual laborers (70-73). It is in her close work with pedagogical materials that NeCamp most powerfully makes her case for the value of placing seemingly

disparate but contemporary educational movements in dialogue with each other. After moving through NeCamp's analyses of the divergent pedagogical practices of the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs, despite their common roots in Dewey's pedagogical philosophy, readers might well find themselves considering how their own classroom practices might be linked in surprising ways to the practices of other educators through complex social, cultural, political, economic, and intellectual genealogies.

In chapter four, NeCamp moves beyond classroom spaces and the pedagogical methods and materials deployed there. Turning her gaze to the public sphere, she documents how the Moonlight Schools and the Americanization movement presented their educational projects to fellow educators, funders, and policymakers. NeCamp makes the case that both Stewart and advocates of Americanization programs were most successful when their calls for funding and support were presented as a matter of cultural and racial defense, rather than as an issue of social justice or compassion (84). Moreover, NeCamp begins more precisely pinpointing in this public discourse the causes of Stewart's waning influence in educational circles. For NeCamp, Stewart's rhetorical choice to focus on the educational needs of "real" Americans (white and native born), despite the fact that Moonlight Schools existed in African American communities and on Native American reservations, created an unbridgeable gulf between the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs. Stewart's inability to gain traction for her educational agenda was further exacerbated by her disdain for the ways in which the existing intellectual resources of immigrants, who might be quite accomplished as readers and writers of their native languages, were discounted in classes focused on phonics as the gateway to future academic opportunities (98-102).

Chapter five affords readers further opportunity to consider why Stewart and her Moonlight Schools receded from the national scene as the adult educators who traced their roots to Americanization programs gained ascendancy. The Moonlight Schools' reliance on volunteer teachers and commitment to the notion that any literate person could teach others to read and write was quickly eclipsed by rapidly escalating, government-endorsed standards of literacy. Such literacy standards required credentialed teachers, not well-intentioned, crusading volunteers. While Stewart relied on the personal testimony of students and volunteer teachers, mostly women, to document the good work of the Moonlight Schools, proponents of adult education, who had allied themselves with colleges and universities, were able to invoke research studies and scientific rhetoric to establish the efficacy of their pedagogical methods and chart the outcomes of their work (145-49). With only a tantalizingly brief acknowledgment of the gender dynamics involved in the processes of professionalization that overtook many occupations in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, NeCamp leaves open the door for further feminist analysis of the Moonlight Schools, Americanization programs, and the rise of adult education as a specialized endeavor requiring professional credentials (134). Perhaps not surprisingly, Stewart's most vocal and effective detractors were men committed to the professionalization of literacy instruction, including Robert Deming, chair of the NEA's Committee on Adult Education, and his successor, Lewis R. Alderman, as well as NACI chair M.S. Robertson, and the NACI's secretary, Rufus Weaver.

In her final chapter, "Implications and Conclusions," NeCamp drives home the case that the Moonlight Schools and the Americanization movement "spawned a rhetoric of literacy education that framed—and continues to frame—the disciplinary identity of literacy educators" (142). NeCamp rightly reminds today's teachers of reading and writing that we need to be aware of how we participate in the public representations of literacy education. She urges us to be particularly mindful about how we take up questions of teachers' qualifications to provide instruction in reading and writing, particularly as graduate students and part-time teachers are thrust into college composition classrooms with varied amounts of training and support. Moreover, she calls teachers of reading and writing to be fully cognizant that how we choose to describe literacy as a complex (or not so complex) task has implications for how the wider public conceives of our students, our institutions, and our nation.

In *Adult Literacy and American Identity*, Samantha NeCamp unequivocally makes the case for including the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs within broader histories of literacy education. NeCamp also, though, presents readers with an invaluable opportunity to consider how the pedagogical programs that educators develop at particular moments in time do not exist in isolation from other educational endeavors and that pedagogies must be continually revised and (re)presented to the public in response to changing historical circumstances. By reconstructing the histories of the Moonlight Schools and Americanization programs in tandem, NeCamp ensures that the voices of diverse educational activists from the early twentieth century remain relevant for twenty-first century literacy educators as we continue the work of defining our place in the public's imagination.

About the Author

Jane Greer is Director of Undergraduate Research at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, where she also serves as Associate Professor English and Women's & Gender Studies. She is the co-editor, with Laurie Grobman, of *Pedagogies of Public Memory: Teaching Writing at Museums, Archives, and Memorials* (Routledge, 2015) and editor of *Girls and Literacy in America: Historical Perspectives to the Present* (ABC-Clio, 2003). Her research on the rhetorical practices of girls and women has appeared in *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and numerous edited collections.