

HEQA - Kristan McCullum

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:49] **Kristan McCullum:** My name is Kristan McCullum, and I'm a doctoral student in the social foundations of education program at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development. I am the author of, "They Will Liberate Themselves: Education, Citizenship, and Civil Rights in the Appalachian Coal Fields." So when people refer to central Appalachia, they are typically referring to West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, and parts of east Tennessee and western North Carolina. And so while I acknowledge that Appalachia is a large and diverse region, when I use the term Appalachia, I'm referring to central Appalachia. Now central Appalachia has been historically mythologized as White. Scholars such as Alan Beto and Henry Shapiro have written about the discovery of Appalachia as an idea, or what, or what Beto calls this "literary and political invention."

[00:01:39] So following the Civil War, writers, novelists and missionaries perpetuated this idea that made Appalachia an othered region of poor, backward, White people who needed uplift and assistance to be brought into modernity. Geographically, Appalachia is not the Deep South and its mountainous terrain has often been viewed as being physically inconducive to the institution of slavery. Um, while scholars have concluded that slavery was not prominent in the region, many have acknowledged that the region was not fully innocent. However, these myths of Whiteness and racial innocence persisted. So in the 1960s, the nation turned its attention to Appalachia again, as this poor White region. And in 1964, President Lyndon B Johnson declared a war on poverty from a porch in Eastern Kentucky.

[00:02:25] Elizabeth Kat and Jessica Wilkerson had discussed the ways in which this national attention on White poverty in Appalachia obscured the realities of

racial inequality in the region. And this was at the height of the Civil Rights movement, and the ways in which the movement transpired in the region was ignored at this time and has been understudied since then. Another reason for this is that these myths of Whiteness and racial innocence have also perpetuated this myth of Black invisibility that scholars Clarence Wright and Edward Kabel introduced. And the historiography of Black Appalachia has certainly been extended over the past few decades, but there's still been little study on the experiences of Black Appalachians during the Civil Rights movement.

[00:03:07] Thousands of black southerners had migrated to the central Appalachian coal fields for equal pay for equal work. Um, but by the 1940s automation, uh, a coal bust and its placement forced so many of these Black Southerners out of the region. For example, in Jenkins, during the 1950s and sixties, there was just a very small Black population left. But a large part of this narrative is about demonstrating that the Civil Rights movement did happen here. It may have looked a little different and perhaps quieter than how the movement played out in the Deep South, but people experienced it. And this article really gets to the heart of how they experienced it in a predominantly White coal town.

[00:03:46] What did an Appalachian Jim Crow look like? In what ways did Black Appalachians advocate for their civil and human rights? But more importantly, this article isn't just about examining racism or race relations in this coal town. I try to illuminate the ways in which Black Appalachians desired, what Luther Adams calls "full and free lives." Like so many other studies on Black education in the south, this narrative highlights the role of education as a path toward liberation members of the Black community were not just acting against discrimination. They had always held dreams and education was the path toward achieving those dreams. So Black Appalachians acted in ways that informed with this from the care and high expectations of Black teachers, to the advocacy of parents, to student demonstrations for full citizenship. So basically this article recovers and reconstructs, the Civil Rights movement in an Appalachian town, through the people's histories, through those who lived it.

[00:04:46] I think it's worth noting that I was born and raised in Jenkins. I didn't know anything about this history while growing up. Um, in the winter of 2017, my dad actually took me over the mountain to Harlan County, Kentucky, to the towns of Benham and Lynch. Lynch is the headquarters to the Eastern Kentucky Social Club, which was formed in 1969 by a group of Black

Appalachians as a way of preserving their heritage and history after so many had migrated away from the region. It's actually located in what used to be Lynch's all Black school.

[00:05:18] So as I kept seeing these markers and memorials dedicated to Black history throughout Lynch, I got to thinking about Jenkins. Knowing that it would have also had a large migration to the coalfields, given that it was a large coal producer. So upon research, I found a note about Dunham High School, the all Black school in Jenkins. And so I began visiting local libraries and archives, and I realized that there was very little documentation about the school or Black history in general. And this of course didn't surprise me because Vanessa Siddle Walker has documented the problem of how the records of formerly segregated all Black schools have been lost or erased.

[00:05:54] Um, and the actual school building had burned down. So this history has--had been made invisible. Um, but the history largely comes from those who lived it and their perspectives are important to correcting these myths of Black invisibility and regional racial innocence because while many scholars have noted that race relations in the mountains were complex--and in many ways they were. So for example, in many ways, Black and White people were living near each other in the "hollers." And a holler is like a little valley in between the mountains. Um, and Black and White miners were working together underground, but there was still a racial hierarchy in which Black people were not accepted within certain spaces. And education itself was legally segregated until 1954. But even after that, the school district did not desegregate until 1964. And at this point, the Black student population was very, very small. And even still, during this time other public spaces, like the drug store wanted to maintain the status quo until Black students protested in the late 1960s. So these examples really reinserted Appalachia within the Civil Rights historiography.

[00:07:02] This project extends the borders of the Civil Rights movement to include a region that has often been marginalized within the historiography. We see how the struggle for civil and human rights transpired in this coal town of Appalachia. And one of my major arguments is that Black Appalachians acted in both big and small ways in order to fulfill their dreams. The involvement of parents and teachers who reinforced high expectations each day were important to the narrators realizing their potential. Meanwhile parents and students protesting demonstrates that they desired first-class resources and treatment and, and recognition of their humanity.

[00:07:38] And many of these actions enabled students to make choices for themselves when it came time to either stay or leave the mountains, and many did leave to pursue higher education and other possibilities because there was limited opportunity for them in the coal fields. So they went on to make their places elsewhere.

[00:07:55] So I think this project extends our knowledge about the movement, but it also reminds us that Appalachia was not an exceptional region when it comes to racism and discrimination. And I think the implications of that are important for us as both a region and a country in reckoning with our whole history.

[00:08:16] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:08:35] **Kristan McCullum:** This research really emphasizes storytelling through the oral histories of narrators who experienced this particular historical moment. And quite frankly, this history could not be reconstructed without their voices and perspectives. Uh, the oral histories work as a counter narrative against this master narrative of Appalachian history that paints the region as racially innocent and its Black population invisible.

[00:09:00] So the goal was for the narrators to tell their stories as much as possible. With that being said, as a White researcher from this community, I have to constantly be reflexive about the ways in which I am still the person determining what gets told in the story. And I think positionality is important when you are doing this work.

[00:09:19] I also critically examined school board meeting minutes. And when you examine physical archives, you have to be really critical and thoughtful about analysis. What are the power dynamics in how this history has been documented? How do these minutes triangulate or depart from the perspectives of the narrators? And while historians often stress triangulation of sources to support oral history research, it was important for me to prioritize the narrator's histories for what they are, their memories of how they experienced a particular moment, because the perspectives of Black

Appalachians have been largely marginalized. So prioritizing and highlighting their voices provides a more critical and thorough treatment of Appalachian history.

[00:10:08] So my research draws upon multiple disciplines. Um, so for further reading on Black Appalachia, I would recommend Karida Brown's *Gone Home: Roots and Race Through Appalachia* (it's on UNC Press) and William H. Turner just published a new book called *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachia and Coal Towns* (on West Virginia University Press). But I also see my work really building upon historiography of Black education. So scholars like Vanessa Siddle Walker's *Their Highest Potential*, um, David Cecelski's *Along Freedom Road* and R. Scott Baker's *Paradoxes of Desegregation*. These studies on North Carolina and South Carolina really fit into the historiography of what I see my work contributing to. And there are many others, but those are some of the major ones that I would recommend.

[00:11:00] So I think we can and should continue to broaden our conceptualization of the Civil Rights movement. We can be looking into our local communities, listening to the stories of elders who experienced and live this particular moment. We can look at places outside, um, the Deep South and outside of these larger events that gained more national attention than, you know, some of the more smaller, rural places in different parts of our country. The stories are out there, and I think they're just, you know, they're waiting to be told. And so broadening our conceptualization of the movement, extending its borders, looking at different places and people. I think there's just so much out there that's just waiting to be told so that we can get a fuller understanding of the movement, of our history as a country, and the ways in which, you know, the struggle for freedom has--it's still yet to be realized, I think.

[00:12:10] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.