



## The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston

by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021, Pp. 370, \$35.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780674249110

Rebecca S. Montgomery

To cite this article: Rebecca S. Montgomery (2021) The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston, *American Nineteenth Century History*, 22:3, 345-347, DOI: [10.1080/14664658.2021.2015523](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.2015523)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.2015523>



Published online: 11 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

emancipation period. This gorgeously written and rigorously researched text makes an indispensable contribution to Black history and will transform how intellectual historians engage with the Black Atlantic.

Shelby M. Sinclair  
*Princeton University*

© 2022 Shelby M. Sinclair  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.2015522>



**The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston**, by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021, Pp. 370, \$35.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780674249110

*The Education Trap* contributes to a growing body of work that critiques the United States' tendency to regard educational opportunity as the single, best method of resolving the problem of income inequality. As numerous historians have shown, when faced with stark inequalities in urban industrial society, concerned Americans turned to education to create a broad, shared prosperity. Reluctant to rely on social welfare programs or a redistribution of wealth to achieve this goal, they endorsed educational solutions that placed responsibility for success on the individual while ignoring the impact of biases and discrimination in wider society. Cristina Viviana Groeger intervenes in this discussion by considering workers as the products of education and exploring the reasons why compensation for their labor did not always correlate with levels of knowledge and skill. Focusing on Boston, Massachusetts, between the 1870s and 1940, this study encompasses educational services ranging from philanthropic and proprietary private schools to public schools and the city's colleges and universities. In addition to examining organized labor's struggle to maintain workplace control, Groeger traces the efforts of Boston's white male elites – mostly native-born Protestants associated with Harvard University – to perpetuate their power and privilege in the face of significant gains by Irish Catholics, Russian Jews, and women. Even though many of her findings will be familiar to historians of education, they are uniquely placed within a holistic framework that provides fresh insights by revealing patterns of institutionalized discrimination that similarly affected disparate groups.

As discussed in the first several chapters, formal education was not a requisite for employment during the late nineteenth century, although the concurrent growth of poverty and industry increased its importance. Reformers who wanted to help the working poor believed that providing them with formal training would raise the status of manual labor and improve wages. Acting as if education could dissolve the constrictive boundaries of class, they overlooked the role of power relations in determining whether work was defined as skilled or unskilled. When the Women's Educational and Industrial Union opened a School of Housekeeping in 1897 with the goal of making domestic service a skilled trade, they ignored the ways its low status and pay were rooted in power relations that subordinated household workers and denied them individual autonomy. Rather than addressing workplace relations, reformers persisted in thinking that

scientific training was the key to solving the “servant problem” (p. 68). The project attracted few students since domestic workers able to attend school were more interested in pursuing a trade or occupation with higher status and pay.

Albeit differently configured, power relations also affected plans to implement educational solutions through public schools. Efforts to use industrial education to provide youth with a dependable avenue to employment failed mostly because of a bitter struggle between employers and craft unions for control of training. Public schools found it difficult to fund and staff programs, and union success at preventing manufacturers from sponsoring trade schools led employers to eliminate most of the need for apprenticeships or other specialized training by further deskilling the position of machine operative. In contrast, while the development of commercial and business courses of study in public schools was a highly successful response to public demand, school administrators’ assumption that male students were destined for careers as businessmen while female students would enter lower-level office work influenced them to favor young men in the allocation of resources. Women were further disadvantaged by the privileging of men in hiring and promotion practices and by the deliberate attempts of male white-collar workers to create exclusive organizations in response to the feminization of vocations such as stenography. As a result, most women worked under the authority of male managers and lost ground in wages and status compared to industrial workers, turning their white collars pink.

As the example of pink-collar workers illustrates, Groeger is particularly effective in her analysis of the strategies men adopted to create and maintain privileged positions for themselves within occupations and professions. The last two chapters highlight the mechanisms by which Boston’s elite white men were able to control access to the benefits of post-secondary education and professional status in education, law, and business. Within each of these arenas of struggle, similar strategies emerged to combat impressive increases in the numbers of women and persons from immigrant and working-class backgrounds in the professions. One strategy involved mobilizing elite networks of political influence to deny degree-granting rights to schools serving female and nonelite students. Support for these efforts often came from private schools and colleges seeking to eliminate competition. Other approaches included creating new credentialing standards that non-elite schools would find financially difficult to meet and implementing tracks of specialization that channelled only Protestant white men from upper-class backgrounds into the most prestigious and lucrative positions. Elite institutions such as Harvard also used blatantly discriminatory admission standards and employment placement services to consolidate the privilege of their favored demographic group. The success of these efforts established an educational order in which a degree from an elite institution bestowed social, economic, and political power on men from the right race, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. For students who fit other categories, the rewards of an elite education were less certain.

Historians of women have long recognized that educational and occupational segregation and exclusion deny women equal opportunity, and Groeger documents how these forms of discrimination were more generally deployed and similarly detrimental for workers from nonelite backgrounds. By meticulously documenting the steps through which different workplaces were transformed, and by analyzing the role of education in creating and defining hierarchies of power within them, Groeger also provides numerous insights of importance for the histories of labor and social justice as well as

education. At a time when increasing numbers of Americans are concerned about the legacies of systemic discrimination, *The Education Trap* is a timely reminder of the destructive and undemocratic impact of exclusionary educational elitism.

Rebecca S. Montgomery  
Texas State University

© 2022 Rebecca S. Montgomery  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.2015523>



**Call My Name, Clemson: Documenting the Black Experience in an American University Community**, by Rhondda Robinson Thomas, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020, Pp. 297, \$19.95 (pbk), \$19.95 (e-book), ISBN 9781609387202, ISBN 9781609387419

Over the past two decades, historians have begun to seriously explore the complex connections between African Americans – both enslaved and free – and higher education in the United States. A burgeoning new literature on this subject includes Craig Steven Wilder’s *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (2013), Alfred L. Brophy’s *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts, and the Coming of Civil War* (2016), my own *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680–1860* (2016), *Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies* (2019), edited by Leslie M. Harris, James T. Campbell, and Brophy, and *Educated in Tyranny: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s University* (2019), edited by Maurie D. McInnis and Louis P. Nelson. At first glance, Rhondda Robinson Thomas’s *Call My Name, Clemson: Documenting the Black Experience in an American University Community* appears to be the newest addition to this list.

*Call my Name, Clemson* is not, however, primarily a history of the Black experience at Clemson University. Those looking for more than a smattering of the history of the enslaved people who worked on John C. Calhoun’s plantation (which later became Clemson’s campus), or the Black convict laborers leased to construct the first college buildings, or the first African American students to integrate Clemson in the 1960s must look elsewhere. *Call My Name, Clemson* is primarily the story of the author’s experience as a professor of African American Literature at Clemson from her arrival in 2007 through to early 2020. Much of the book reads as a detailed memoir of Thomas’s odyssey as she discovers Clemson’s Black history and then works with others to bring it to light through her “Call My Name” project. Like Odysseus, she is the protagonist of the story; rather than fighting Polyphemus, Circe, or Scylla, she fights institutional racism and ignorance (as well as bureaucratic inertia, red tape, and the demands of the tenure clock).

As befitting the work of a literature professor, *Call My Name, Clemson* is creatively organized. There are seven brief but highly interesting “Call and Response” segments, some of which were written not by Thomas herself but by Clemson alumni, faculty, and staff, plus one author not connected directly to Clemson, Monica Williams-Hudgens, the mixed-race granddaughter of former Senator Strom Thurmond. Many of these segments are quite moving, and they are also where the history of African Americans at Clemson can be gleaned in the book. For example, Thomas writes the Call “Of String and Mammy” and Michael Lemahieu, an associate professor of English at Clemson, writes the Response “Black Lives Have Always Mattered.” In the Call, Thomas focuses on the enslaved woman Susan Richardson, who was forced to sleep near her mistress, Anna Calhoun Clemson, with a