

local communities responded—typically poorly—to the specter of interracial marriage; we see how Black and White students navigated the sharing (or racial segregation) of dining hall tables; we see how White college presidents hired or, more often, did *not* hire Black faculty amid conflicting demands from constituents. And throughout, Bell highlights the roles of Black students and alumni as “agents of change” who were the strongest advocates for their own equal treatment (p. 8).

Bell’s highly focused narrative does come with some drawbacks. While readers get a good sense of how religious and gender ideology permeated the abolitionist colleges, Bell could have given even more context on race and racism. In the absence of regular references to other nineteenth-century colleges, Bell’s critiques can cause readers to forget just how advanced the abolitionist colleges were in comparison. Bell also gives only limited insight into the sources of the colleges’ reinvigorated bigotry. He points toward the rise of two intellectual movements, liberalism and cultural evolutionism, which recast racial equality as the result of an individual’s own merit or a race’s past effort rather than as an intrinsic, preexisting element of human nature. Other causes, however, may have been equally influential. The egalitarian evangelicalism of the abolitionist colleges’ early years is notably absent from Bell’s later chapters, probably because of the institutions’ realignments with a more hierarchy-minded mainstream Christianity. Theology could inspire equality; it could also reinforce difference. Relatedly, it seems likely that this renewed racism did not have academic origins but rather was born, or else never died, in more humble social spaces such as homes and churches. Intellectualism may have only dressed up old prejudices learned outside the ivory tower, prejudices that no civil war could kill.

All the same, *Degrees of Equality* is an excellent book and would make a good addition to the graduate or undergraduate history classroom. Graduate students can learn much from Bell’s precise recounting of human action and motivation. Undergraduates can learn this as well, but also a more basic and “relevant” lesson: that the priorities of their institutions, and even the banalities of the campus dining hall or dating scene, are not without meaning.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.9

## Victoria Cain. *Schools and Screens: A Watchful History*

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021. 272 pp.

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Schools and screens are, as Victoria Cain states early in her new volume, our two “most powerful educational forces.” (p. 3). A history of the way that schools made

use of the new technologies that evolved over the course of the twentieth century is bound to be a monumental task. As one might imagine, the history she weaves is a complex one. With each new technology, reformers tended to accept as an article of faith that “interactions with screen media could successfully shape the minds, hearts, and behaviors of future citizens” (p. 6) and eagerly fought to have the latest screen technology adopted in the classroom and adapted to the curricula. Each new technology seemed to come with a promise to reshape the way children learned. Each new technology, however, also represented a new avenue for advertisement and commercial entertainments, private money, neoliberal reforms, and external control and oversight of teachers to sneak into the classroom.

*Schools and Screens* broadly traces three waves of new technology in US classrooms, moving from the earliest “noon movie” screenings in school auditoriums in the 1930s, through the proliferation of televisions as purveyors of educational content both in and out of classrooms in the postwar era, and to finally the infusion of personal computers in public schools in the waning days of the twentieth century. The first portions of the book begin by presenting the history of the movie projector as a tool for public educators. When it came to the use of film for educational purposes, World War II had made two things evident. First, the educative power of film could be harnessed for the purposes of shaping public opinion, as newsreels and propaganda films had demonstrated. Second, the military use of the training film, accompanied by pre- and post-film discussion, could be employed as a model for incorporating new media in public school classrooms. Cain’s book makes a compelling case that the main thesis of Edgar Dale’s 1938 manual *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures*, that film both provides information and elicits emotion and that people can develop emotional connections to moving images that are more difficult to evoke with the printed word, served as an organizing principle for educational reformers who sought to reimagine civic education in “a century in which political events were increasingly mediated by screens” (p. 32). The classroom projector represented an effective new pedagogical tool, but it also presented an opportunity to provide students with the new visual literacies they would need to be responsible citizens in the modern world.

The largest section, entailing three of the five chapters, of *Screens and Schools* focuses on the medium of television. The first of these chapters deals largely with the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Advancement of Education (FAE) and its efforts to promote television as a means to “refashion US education along technocratic lines, replacing provincial variations with a single modern system designed by national experts” (p. 44). The chapter itself deftly demonstrates the outsized role the FAE played in developing educational programming and ensuring that classrooms had the television screens to air it, though the chapter could have benefited from a bit more justification for its decision to focus so much attention solely on the FAE. It is never quite clear whether this was the only such organization or simply the largest one. That said, the larger historical context of these efforts to centralize education using television (and the corresponding backlash among groups that ranged from progressive college professors to anti-desegregation Southern conservatives) is carefully developed, as is the effect these efforts had of taking power away from classroom teachers (often for reasons steeped in sexism).

The remaining two chapters regarding television are fascinating. Once Cain establishes that there was a proliferation of televisions in public schools and explains how that came to be, she pivots to examining the production of educational television programming. Of course, she begins by highlighting Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett's efforts to get the program that would eventually become *Sesame Street* launched. This history, however, is well trod, and the book wisely decides not to rehash the history of the Children's Television Workshop in any great detail. Instead, Cain uses the example of *Sesame Street* to add to the argument that the use of educational media was often as much (or more) about affective dimensions than strictly cognitive or academic ones, tying the public television children's programming to the origins of socio-emotional learning: "As a result, they [progressive pedagogues] frequently suggested contemporary film shorts, photographic slides, and television shows to prompt discussion about students' feelings toward themselves and others" (p. 93). Cain also expands the view of children's public television shows beyond *Sesame Street* to the host of often overlooked programs like Emergency School Aid Act-funded shows *Bean Sprouts*, *Watch Your Mouth*, and *Carrascolendas*. The book also adds to the scant scholarship that exists on other late-1970s and 1980s PBS programming, such as *The Letter People*, *Big Blue Marble*, and *Zoom*.

One of the most interesting (yet disappointingly short) sections of the book details commercial television stations' outreach efforts to provide read-along scripts and instructional materials to guide students' television viewing (both inside and outside of class) and promote literacy. This is a fascinating and under-examined piece of educational history that is remarkable in the way that it lies at the nexus of education and commercial popular media. More substantial work needs to be done on the way that purveyors of commercial television wanted to use a potential relationship with public education to improve the perceptions that their medium was simply "a vast wasteland."

As the book moves into its final sections chronicling the history of the classroom computer, it does a good job balancing the more technical discussion of the development of hardware and software of personal computing with the social implications of the technology. As an example, the development of the graphical user interface had profound implications for the adoption of computers in the classroom, and Cain does a lovely job giving a sense of both how the technology changed *and* why those changes mattered. Moreover, she does this while still couching the reformers' efforts within the larger discourse that had typified twentieth-century attitudes regarding technology in the classroom. As it had with radio, film, and television, the argument remained that "wired classrooms would empower students to transcend their circumstances, for they would no longer be confined to restrictive curricula, inadequate teachers, or impassable distances" (p. 164). This, ultimately, is the thesis that ties the entire book together. The story of the history of screens in the classroom is the story of people placing a great deal of optimistic faith in the ability of technology to improve educational outcomes. At the same time, it is also the story of the failed promise, the tale of how new technology gets shoehorned into existing curricula without upsetting the overarching structure of public schooling or, for the most part, those structural inequalities that are built into the system. Each wave of technology

promises to revolutionize public education, and, as Cain wryly notes, “educators and researchers old enough to recall similar promises about other media technology just rolled their eyes” (p. 165).

Finishing the book with a history of classroom computers allows the narrative to end very near the present, and the book was published recently enough that it could include a discussion about the relationship between screens, schools, and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It gives the whole book more current relevance. Also, the idea that conservatives mobilized against each of the new screen technologies for fear that “new experiments in classroom screen media had intensified public schools’ efforts to erode family authority and traditional values” (p. 96) seems particularly relevant in the current historical moment, a time of reactionary movements promoting book banning (such as the removal of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* by a Tennessee school board in January of 2022) and ongoing battles against critical race theory.

We have a tendency to project our greatest hopes regarding education onto school screens. Generations of reformers have argued that each new iteration of “the screen,” whether it be Hollywood films, the television, or the personal computer, will democratize educational access and revolutionize the way our children learn. Looking at the history, though, is crucial, as Cain’s book clearly shows us that each new medium has struggled to keep itself from reinforcing (or even amplifying) existing inequalities, has justified its own necessity by downplaying the importance of effective teachers, has provided increased access of commercial interests into the public sphere, and often has failed to clearly envision its objectives.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.6

## Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon. *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age*

Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 320 pp.

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*Permanent Crisis* is an ambitious intellectual history of the modern humanities that locates the origins of our culture wars over higher education in the contests over the nineteenth-century German university. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon argue that the so-called crisis of the humanities is neither a recent phenomenon, as culture warriors like Allan Bloom and William Deresiewicz have claimed, nor has it resulted from the erosion of a once-cohesive tradition dating back to the Renaissance. Rather, both our modern conception of “the humanities” and our sense of its decline