

PREFACE

Looking Back, Looking Forward: Reading *The Unfinished Agenda*

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The *Black Issues in Higher Education* editorial team had a very broad audience in mind when we put this book together. We thought about a readership who might range from those who may not know anything about the case to those who may have more specialized knowledge. We were committed to creating a widely accessible book because we feel that a deep understanding of the impact of *Brown* is essential to continue the efforts toward full citizenship for all Americans. *Brown* was an item on that larger agenda. *The Unfinished Agenda* offers enlightening chapters on themes that make up this landmark case and provides a lens through which to view race relations and education in America today.

These chapters are not meant to be definitive; they are to serve as reflections on the profound transformation of the United States over the past fifty years. We asked ten scholars, researchers, and writers from very diverse backgrounds to share their perspectives. To view *Brown* solely through a legal lens ignores its profound reverberations. To examine only the educational and social outcomes attributed to *Brown* ignores the responsibility of the courts and the legal system. To appreciate the impact and significance of *Brown* over a fifty-year span of segregation-desegregation-resegregation in American education, a wide variety of voices had to be represented, including visionaries who participated in the *Brown* decision.

The strength of this book is its focus on the relationships between core issues and tangential arguments about the decision. The chapters are intentionally interpretive. The contributors have rendered some of the most provocative and insightful analyses available on the topic.

Kahlil Chism's chapter serves as a detailed and much-needed overview of the case. Chism's piece anchors every other chapter in this book and brings the timeline found on page xxxiii to life.

Juan Williams's chapter on the attorneys details the legal strategy developed by former dean of Howard University School of Law Charles Hamilton Houston and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Williams shows us Thurgood Marshall up close, his posture in the courtroom, and how he won over an all-white Supreme Court. The legal analysis provided by Charles Ogletree's chapter makes sense of the cases leading up to *Brown* while also explaining recent cases that have all but reversed the impact of *Brown* in the courts. The legal mind of Ms. Geneva Crenshaw in Derrick Bell's chapter will certainly intrigue. A straightforward and easy-to-follow dialogue that examines several important legal cases, Bell's chapter considers what might have happened if *Brown* had been lost.

Mary Futrell's chapter gives extensive detail about the role desegregation played in the waning presence of black teachers while also showing that the rise of blacks to top decision-making positions in education could not have been possible without *Brown*. Futrell's argument is solid, but her reflections on her experience as a teacher during this period form the heart of the chapter.

Richard Wright's chapter uses sociolinguistic methods to explore the hidden meanings behind the language in the decision. The chapter simplifies some rather complex analytical tools to provide an easy-to-follow interpretation of the use of terminology such as "separate but equal."

The *Black Issues* editorial team made a special effort to include perspectives from other communities that have been impacted by *Brown*. The legacy of struggle against racism, segregation, and equal access to education in the Asian American and Latino communities is discussed in the riveting chapters written by Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Marco Portales. Hu-DeHart's comparative analysis of Asian American students demystifies the "virtue" of the model minority label given to Asians everywhere.

A. Wade Boykin and James Jones's chapter is the perfect overlap for Hu-DeHart's and Portales' chapters. Boykin and Jones survey the major approaches to black children's education today, but the centerpiece of their argument is the psychological impact of diversity on all children.

Significantly, Gary Orfield's chapter at the close of this book calls to our attention the need for renewing our commitment to movement-building and political change to finish the work started so many years ago.

We also wanted to make the lived experience of *Brown* available to our readers. Ishmail Conway was asked to interview several people who were involved with the case, and the results of his and other interviews are the Voices of the Era pieces throughout. These firsthand reflections of experiences during segregation are legacies, and it would have been unwise to ignore these voices. We feel privileged to include them.

There is great power and pain in all the personal stories about *Brown* that have been tucked away for the past fifty years in the collective consciousness of those who waged a valiant struggle for educational equality for black children in the United States. The remarkable common thread is that each group of activists sought relief from oppression and access to opportunity, even under dire circumstances, by challenging the law. These narratives serve as valuable benchmarks for continued analysis of the unfinished agenda in post-*Brown* America.

The core issues addressed in *The Unfinished Agenda* constitute areas of contentious debate. It is impossible to cover them fully, and it has been a challenge looking back and looking forward with a critical eye. There is much to read and much to understand about *Brown*, and we trust that *The Unfinished Agenda* will spur you to begin your own fiftieth-anniversary reflection.

About Voices of the Era

Many of the sidebar narratives in this volume are drawn from Ishmail Conway's interviews with plaintiffs, attorneys, teachers, students, and activists involved in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. This is but a small collection of oral histories related to this historic decision in the Supreme Court and in earlier decisions in lower courts.

It was not an easy task to conduct these interviews because many of the living plaintiffs, attorneys, and leaders are infirm. Regrettably, one of the Delaware plaintiffs, the Rev. Shirley Bula Stamps, had a fatal heart attack the day before the scheduled interview.

Recording these oral histories was a group effort. Researchers from the Smithsonian Institution Museum, the National Archives, the Brown Foundation, Howard University, Washburn University, Delaware State University, and a host of others from the plaintiffs' five states assisted in making valuable archival information available. Five of the narratives were recorded in Washington, D.C., at the historic "Voices of the Legacy: Dialogue and Remembrances," the first session of the Brown Presidential Commission. Many of those interviewed revealed others in their communities who had stories about *Brown*. For example, Topeka plaintiff Zelma Henderson suggested that Mr. Merrill Ross be added to the list. Mr. Ross, a former Tuskegee airman, was the only Negro principal in Topeka in 1954.

The narratives represent the essence of each interviewee's story and provide added insight for *The Unfinished Agenda* from lived experiences.

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