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# DESEGREGATING STATE UNIVERSITIES IN THE GREAT PLAINS

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# REVIEW ESSAY

*Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road to Justice.* By Gary M. Lavergne. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. x + 354 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95.

*Race and the University: A Memoir.* By George Henderson. Foreword by David W. Levy. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010. xx + 248 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

## DESEGREGATING STATE UNIVERSITIES IN THE GREAT PLAINS

On February 9, 1969, the University of Oklahoma kicked off its annual Black History Week with an especially distinguished visitor, the noted African American author and television journalist Louis E. Lomax. After Lomax's public address, there was a reception at the home of George Henderson, one of only a handful of black professors at the university and the first African American ever to purchase a home in the university town of Norman. When Henderson escorted Lomax back to his room at the Holiday Inn, the two reminisced about the civil rights movement. "Then, as if speaking to himself, [Lomax] said in a soft voice, 'You know, George, we have spent the better part of our lives trying to gain our freedom so that our children can come to an almost all-white place like this and say, 'I don't want to live or even go to a school here.' I can't blame them. I'm tired of trying to live in communities like Norman too.'" George Henderson smiled and asked, "'It's about the right for them, and not some bigot, to make that decision, isn't it?'"<sup>1</sup>

Two recently published books offer thoughtful accounts of how desegregation began and proceeded at two state universities in the Great Plains. Gary M. Lavergne's *Before Brown* is a deeply researched account of Heman Marion Sweatt's efforts to gain admission to the law school at the University of Texas. *Race and the University: A Memoir*, by George Henderson, is an engrossing chronicle of the problems black students faced and reacted to after they matriculated at the University of Oklahoma.

### TEXAS

Heman Sweatt, born in 1912, graduated in 1934 from Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. He married his high-school sweetheart and eventually found a steady job with the post office. Gary M. Lavergne describes Sweatt as a "kind, gentle, mild-mannered, and introverted mailman."<sup>2</sup> As a graduate of an accredited college, Sweatt was qualified for admission to the University of Texas Law School—save for the fact that he was black, and the University of Texas at that time barred black students from matriculating. Sweatt challenged this restriction in 1945, when he became the plaintiff in a lawsuit that not only desegregated the Texas Law School but also set the stage for the Supreme Court's landmark ruling on school desegregation, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954).

In the 1930s the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had campaigned to equalize educational programs for African Americans. During the 1940s, however, the Association shifted its approach and attacked segregation directly, in the courts. For this, the organization needed plaintiffs, but plaintiffs were hard to find in the Lone Star State, where, according to one poll, "by a ratio of eight to five, African American Texans favored the creation of a university for Negroes rather than the integration of the University of Texas" (BB, 139). Over the course of a nine-month search for a suitable plaintiff, the NAACP was

rebuffed several times. Finally, at a meeting at the Wesley Chapel AME Church in Houston, when Lulu Belle White, an employee of the NAACP, pleaded for a volunteer to serve as a plaintiff, Heman Sweatt stood up and said he would do it.

Sweatt's wife, Connie, opposed her husband's decision. By 1945, she and Heman were enjoying a comfortable life in Houston, where she was a teacher and he a senior mail carrier with an annual salary of \$3,750—"much better than what was usually available to most young black men, even those with an undergraduate college education" (BB, 70). Thanks to civil service regulations, Heman's job was secure, but becoming a plaintiff in a desegregation case would take him away from home more than Connie was used to. The increased notoriety might also lead to harassment of one sort or another. And there was an additional daunting consideration: it had been eleven years since Heman had been a student at Wiley, and his academic record had never been especially strong. His undergraduate transcript contained "a few As, but mostly Bs and Cs" (BB, 18), and some of Sweatt's friends believed he was never serious about becoming a lawyer. Nevertheless, Sweatt's father had been one of eleven charter members of the Houston branch of the NAACP, and the NAACP needed a plaintiff.

When Heman Sweatt volunteered his service to the NAACP, he stepped into the midst of an intraracial debate in the black community. Practically all blacks were opposed to segregation laws that placed racial restrictions on an individual's right to work, travel, or attend school. Many black "pluralists" (i.e., those who supported equal education or integration), however, did not oppose separateness, as long as the separation was neither compulsory nor discriminatory. They did not object to schools or other institutions that were predominantly black, as long as these institutions were adequately funded and not compelled by government policies. "Integrationists," on the other hand, believed that justice could not be obtained unless blacks dispersed throughout society.

As Lavergne tells the story, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's lead lawyer, "believed in integration" and "saw 'separate' as inherently unequal." Marshall had learned this lesson from his teacher and mentor, Charles Houston, who "believed that justice was not possible in a segregated society" (BB, 74). This view was confirmed by Walter White, the NAACP's chief executive officer of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. White was convinced that "numbers of white people, perhaps the majority of Americans, stand ready to take the most distinct advantage of voluntary segregation and cooperation among colored people. Just as soon as they get a group of black folk segregated they use it as a point of attack and discrimination."<sup>3</sup>

The pluralist W. E. B. Du Bois, on the other hand, saw voluntary separation as a reflection of black pride and a necessity for racial progress. For Du Bois, the advancement of colored people depended on training a "Talented Tenth" to become "leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people."<sup>4</sup> Du Bois therefore urged black leaders to live in predominantly black communities, to build institutions there, and to "think of themselves as the servants to do the work [of uplifting] . . . the great mass of the uneducated and inexperienced."<sup>5</sup> Du Bois insisted that "the problem of 12,000,000 Negro people, mostly poor, ignorant workers, is not going to be settled by having their more educated and wealthy classes gradually and continually escape from their race into the mass of the American people." To the extent that the Talented Tenth dispersed, Du Bois wrote, the black masses would be left without proper leaders and would "sink, suffer, and die."<sup>6</sup>

Lavergne does a good job of placing the Sweatt case in the context of the debate among black Texans of the 1940s and 1950s. Lulu White and other local NAACP officials promoted the integrationist views of their national office, while the chief spokesman for pluralism in Texas was Carter Wesley, a leading black lawyer and the publisher of the influential *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*. Lavergne seems not to recognize, however, that this

debate was a reprise of a rift that had divided the NAACP a decade before—a fissure that led Du Bois in 1934 to resign from the organization that he, more than any single individual, had founded and fostered for twenty-five years. When Du Bois had dominated the NAACP, the organization promoted pluralism. After Du Bois departed, Walter White and Thurgood Marshall came to the fore, and the NAACP shifted its emphasis. Integration became the overriding objective.<sup>7</sup>

Some modern writers have favored the pluralist approach. In another deeply researched monograph on the desegregation of twenty-eight state-supported senior and junior colleges in Texas, Amilcar Shabazz sided with those blacks who favored the equalization of separate black schools and looked with suspicion on the NAACP's insistence that true equality could only be attained if blacks were dispersed throughout integrated schools and communities. Shabazz makes a point that the black educator Ronald R. Edmonds has also emphasized: that some (usually middle-class) black students do well in integrated schools; that others (often working-class) do poorly. Shabazz and Edmonds maintain that justice required not only freedom from official racial discrimination but also the establishment of predominantly black schools of good quality.<sup>8</sup>

To prevent desegregation at the University of Texas, the state legislature tried to comply with the “separate but equal” doctrine that the Supreme Court had established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). To this end, the Texas State University for Negroes (TSUN) was funded generously in the 1940s, although the generosity was belated and prompted by a desire to undermine Sweatt's lawsuit. Some wags therefore referred to TSUN as “the house that Sweatt built” (BB, 216). But after Sweatt won his lawsuit in 1950, the legislature cut the budget of TSUN by 39 percent (BB, 266). This came as no surprise to many pluralists, who had predicted that desegregation would lead to the withering of institutions in the black community.

In this dispute, Lavergne sides with Thurgood Marshall. Pluralists had seen Texas's

upgrading of TSUN as a precursor for building more strong black-controlled institutions, but Marshall claimed that integrationists were better than pluralists at getting equal facilities in a shorter period of time. The state had not favored TSUN “until after this lawsuit was filed,” Marshall noted pointedly (BB, 159). Although the NAACP was seeking integration, Marshall said, the NAACP's strategy led to more black-controlled institutions. Admittedly, there were occasional setbacks—such as the decrease in funding for TSUN. But Marshall and the NAACP sensed that such setbacks would be transitory, because blacks were beginning to enjoy political influence more proportional to their numbers. History supports this argument. In 2009, the state legislature appropriated more than \$85 million for Texas Southern University (as TSUN was rechristened in 1951, and where 85 percent of the 11,635 students were black).

In crafting the legal strategy for Sweatt's case, Marshall maintained that a separate law school would not be the equal of the University of Texas Law School. This was the case, Marshall said, because the new school, regardless of its physical facilities, would lack intangible benefits available at the University of Texas—benefits like tradition, prestige, and alumni connections. Marshall's witnesses also said that the Socratic method for teaching law relied on discussion groups that worked better with more diverse groups of students. By introducing testimony about intangibles, Marshall laid the foundation for the Supreme Court's later holding, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), that segregated schools were “inherently unequal.” “They can build an exact duplicate of the University of Texas Law School in brick, mortar, desks, and libraries,” Marshall said, “but it will make no difference as long as it is segregated. . . . How can it be . . . that this law school, which does not have any alumni, can be equivalent to the University of Texas, which has so many members in the state House of Representatives, so many members in the state Senate, [and] one member of this [U.S. Supreme] Court?” (BB, 246).

In winning the *Sweatt* and *Brown* cases, the NAACP bolstered its reputation enormously. Unfortunately, things did not work out so well for Heman Sweatt. After the courtroom victory, he enrolled without incident at the Texas Law School, but from the outset struggled academically. Faculty members said he “didn’t have the educational background,” that he had been “out of school for a long period before taking legal study,” that he “couldn’t write a simple sentence” (BB, 279–80). Sweatt mentioned an additional consideration. The night before he was to take his first law school exam, “A most traumatic thing happened. I was going off with a group of students to study, and my wife just became outraged. And she performed. Her performance was such that we never lived together a day after that. She was on the train going home [to her mother] the next day while I was taking my first examination at the school—and I failed it” (BB, 280–81). Sweatt flunked out of the Texas Law School in 1952, but Laverne salutes him as a good man who displayed courage, perseverance, and sacrifice “for a cause greater than himself” (BB, 288). By 2010, 2,218 African American students were attending classes at the University of Texas, 4.3 percent of its 51,195 students.

#### OKLAHOMA

In his memoir of desegregation at the University of Oklahoma, George Henderson does not discuss the academic problems of black students, perhaps because his focus is on the vanguard of black volunteers who attended the university in the years from 1967 to 1971. The omission of academic matters may also be due to the fact that Henderson, the S. N. Goldman Professor of Human Relations at the university, considered himself a change-agent who would create “a new order” at the university (BB, 49). His goal was to become “a successful community activist” on campus (RU, 47).

Henderson’s formal work focused on “creating and implementing a graduate level program to train students to combat racial discrimination and other acts of bigotry” (RU, 152). As

one example of this work, he arranged an “open housing test” to see if blacks were being discriminated against by apartment owners who used the university’s housing list. Students were divided into three groups—some white, some black, and some racially mixed—and then dispatched to apartments advertised for rent. “The all-white student teams were offered every rental on the list. The mixed-race and all-black teams were offered apartments only in the complexes that already had black renters” (RU, 95).

Henderson’s account deals primarily with his informal work as the faculty adviser for the Afro-American Student Union (ASU). When he arrived at Oklahoma in 1967, Henderson was one of only three black professors at the university. But he bonded with the black students, many of whom were “disillusioned with their isolated lives; and they yearned for much more inclusion in campus and community life” (RU, 26). One senior reported that she was “left out of informal study groups” because, “despite her efforts to be friendly, only three of her white classmates had ever interacted with her” (RU, 63). Another student said the cotton field mural in the College of Business was a symbol of the prevailing social isolation. According to this student, the painting was “the only visual depiction of black endeavors, achievements, or even existence at the University that was on display in a non-athletics building” (RU, 73).

The ASU sensibly responded to white indifference by demanding an expansion of the university’s curriculum to include the study of black life and history. In addition, the group advanced several demands to assuage the anxieties of youths who faced the difficult task of moving from one society to another. In 1969, the ASU pressed for “a dormitory facility designated for black students,” who would then be able to “escape from the pressures of alienation found in their daily lives” (RU, 111–12). The ASU further demanded that “inherently discriminatory” admission requirements be abandoned in order to boost black enrollment to 20 percent of the total by 1973, that is, from about 175 in 1969 to about 4,000 by 1973 (RU,

109, 117).<sup>10</sup> In fact, by 1973 the number of black students had increased to 567. By 2010, this number had increased to 1,176—about 5 percent of the university's 23,281 students.<sup>11</sup>

The ASU also wanted more black professors and administrators to staff programs that would offer MA and PhD degrees in black studies. In addition, they demanded that the university provide a “student year abroad program” that would allow “black students to spend a year abroad at a black university in a black country” (RU, 116). “The white students are getting theirs,” the ASU declared, “so we are going to get ours” (RU, 106).

Moving beyond verbal demands, some of Oklahoma's black students also resorted to disruptive direct action. In 1968, for instance, Willie Wilson led a group of black students into a history course in which they were not enrolled. “They had gotten word that the instructor was going to give the obligatory lecture on slavery. If true to form, he would . . . point out that not everything was bad for slaves. Midway through the apologist portion of the lecture, Willie stood up and shouted, ‘Bull crap. There was nothing good about being a slave.’” Intimidated by the black strangers standing at the back of the room, the instructor was speechless. Four white girls marched out of the class in protest, and one white boy “face[d] the interlopers and said in a stern voice, ‘Leave our class and go somewhere else to create trouble. . . . We paid our money for this class. You didn’t’” (RU, 37).

Henderson concedes, for tactical reasons, that the black students were mistaken in this instance. He had no objection per se to disrupting classes. But he thought “the confrontation might have been even more effective if the target had been the chairman of the History Department. The instructor was an easy target. In fact, he was too easy and that gave him the aura of a helpless victim, which in turn probably placed the black students in the role of oppressors” (RU, 38).

There were limits to Henderson's support for disruptive black students. He was committed to nonviolence, which led him to criticize

“a couple of men,” reacting to the arrest of an antiwar activist at a demonstration following the 1970 shootings at Kent State, who “tried to blow up [a] police car by stuffing burning rags into the fuel tank” (RU, 168). He lamented “the seemingly rampant fistfights between black and white male students, almost all of which were triggered by name-calling” (RU, 182). He took particular exception when several white co-eds were reduced to tears after a group of twelve black students and six American Indian and white students, staging a sit-in at a dining hall, “locked in the students who were eating their lunch, and . . . locked out anyone else who wanted to come in” (RU, 179).

Henderson's account is a memoir—a recollection of events. He does not explicitly offer a solution to problems, but seems to favor the sort of Limited Separation (LS) that W. E. B. Du Bois and other pluralists had envisioned. Since many blacks found it harrowing to be immersed in a predominantly white milieu, Henderson supported the creation of all-black dormitories and all-black organizations like the Afro-American Student Union, but opposed all-white organizations or limiting white interactions with blacks.

Some black intellectuals, Du Bois among them, have touted LS as a necessary prerequisite if college-educated African Americans are to improve conditions in predominantly black communities. Making similar points, historian Carter G. Woodson warned that exposure to the standard curriculum at white colleges, a curriculum that allegedly extolled the achievements of Caucasians, might leave blacks with the conviction that they were inferior;<sup>12</sup> sociologist E. Franklin Frazier warned that even graduates of black colleges were succumbing to an egoistic individualism;<sup>13</sup> and philosopher and poet Alain Locke emphasized the importance of establishing institutions and programs that would instill in black students the conviction that their group was capable of building an advanced civilization.<sup>14</sup> In his *Rage of a Privileged Class* (1993), journalist Ellis Cose maintained that LS would preserve a sense of group identity and set the stage for

a migration of middle-class, college-educated African Americans to return to black communities, where they would establish thousands of businesses, thereby turning slums into thriving independent communities.<sup>15</sup>

Henderson avoids such flights of speculation. He simply wanted what seemed best for the black students he knew at the University of Oklahoma. If they wanted integration, they should have it. If they preferred to stay separate most of the time, but now and then interact with whites, that was fine, too. As its dust jacket notes, *Race and the University* is the “deeply personal memoir” of a black professor “who helped shepherd the transformative wave of black student militancy.”<sup>16</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. George Henderson, *Race and the University: A Memoir* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 101–2 (hereafter cited in text as RU).

2. Gary M. Lavergne, *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road to Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 6 (hereafter cited in text as BB).

3. Walter White, “Segregation: A Symposium,” *The Crisis* 41 (March 1934): 80.

4. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in Booker T. Washington, ed., *The Negro Problem* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903), 30–75.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, quoted by Manning Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 147.

6. W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Negro Nation within the Nation,” *Current History* 42 (June 1935): 265–70.

7. For discussion of this rift, see Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), chapter 6; and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), chapter 9.

8. Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Ronald R. Edmonds, “Effective Education for Minority Pupils,” in Derrick Bell, ed., *Shades of Brown* (New York: Teachers College, 1980), 108–23.

9. “University of Texas at Austin Accountability Report,” January 2011, [http://www.txhighereddata.org/Interactive/Accountability/UNIV\\_Complete\\_PDF.cfm?FICE=003658](http://www.txhighereddata.org/Interactive/Accountability/UNIV_Complete_PDF.cfm?FICE=003658).

10. The ASU demanded “the attainment by 1973 of a student body that is 20 percent Black.” In 1973, the University of Oklahoma enrolled a total of 19,617 students. Cheryl K. Jorgenson to author, July 21, 2011.

11. Cheryl K. Jorgenson to author, July 21, 2011; <http://www.ou.edu/provost/ir/enrollment>.

12. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1933), xii–xiii.

13. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glen-coe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 83–85.

14. Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925).

15. Ellis Close, *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

16. Dust jacket comment by Clarence Lang.