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January 2004

Introduction: the Problem of the Color Line

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Recommended Citation

Clark-Lewis, Elizabeth, "Introduction: the Problem of the Color Line" (2004). *History Department Faculty Publications*. 50.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Ph.D.

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Fifty years after Dr. W. E. B. DuBois wrote these words in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* case dramatized them. This legal action forced the United States to confront the explicit racial caste system imposed on African Americans prior to the constitutional protections guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The *Brown* decision also highlighted how politics, wedded to the maintenance of white supremacy, supported the well-organized *de jure* terror system common in many areas of the United States. This verdict fueled a decade of unparalleled grass-roots activism and thrust the United States into its most dynamic era of change.

This special volume’s essays present new interpretations of the key issues, burgeoning research resources, ideological shifts and tactical transformations that connect local, state and national reform in the decade following the *Brown* decision. These articles outline how scholars and ordinary people — in the decade before and after the *Brown* decision — restructured the United States’ civil rights movement and reshaped international race, citizenship and human dignity questions. These essays provide important new insight into the unwavering conviction of scholars who combated legally sanctioned racism and the unflinching courage of activists confronting white supremacy during the *Brown* decade — and beyond.

Dr. Newman Ham’s explores the complexity of early research models included in the *Brown* decision arguments. She shows how dismantling the terrible effects of segregation required both objective data and innovative research models that provided an urgent plea for justice. The research developed by psychologists Dr. Kenneth Clark and Dr. Mamie Clark as well as the historian Dr.

John Hope Franklin addressed the questions raised by the United States Supreme Court justices. Dr. Debra Newman Ham relates how the attorneys with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund used the testimonies and depositions of expert witnesses to win the 1954 *Brown* decision. This essay recognizes an often overlooked factor in the formation of the case against the separate but equal laws: scholars’ research as a major factors influencing the Court’s *Brown* decision.

The diary of journalist Drew Pearson; the contrasting correspondence of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson; unique government photographs; and rare movie footage — these are just a few of the incredible records identified by Ms. Trichita Chestnut, an Archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration. In addition, her article uncovers the many ways the archival records enrich our knowledge of the federal government’s research on the agency and activism during the civil rights era. This essay details the federal authorities’ responses to the regional and local resistance practices the 1954 *Brown* decision attempted to change.

The article by Dr. David Terry provides a study of an important local organizing effort. African Americans, just because they are African Americans, have undeniably been disadvantaged in their access to local political and economic power. Where the fact of being an African American intersected with poverty or lower-class status, African Americans were doubly or triply disadvantaged. Dr. Terry outlines the many ways local citizens participated in efforts to enhance their employment, housing, recreational, educational, social and political rights in Baltimore, Maryland. The brick-by-brick dismantling of the walls built by Jim Crow racism was achieved by determined people in one community. This model study illustrates the new themes, issues, and questions that

emerge from the study of civil rights on the local level.

The dynamic community and regional ties found in the African American freedom struggle are explored by Dr. Donald Roe. This essay explores how African American educational activists pushed to eliminate double standards and inequality at the community level in the nation's capital. Local residents and community-based organizations utilized educational focused judicial action to fight for change, forge unity, and transform District of Columbia power structures. This article recounts how the *Brown* era educational challenges to segregation redefined the social and political agenda for African Americans in Washington, DC.

Clothing and the meaning of power is at the heart of a long conversations between historians and fashion scholars. Dr. Abena Mhoon's research is concerned with the ways in which identity is represented, constituted, articulated, and contested through dress. The essay explores dress practice as it was embedded in cultural propriety questions and probes the ways clothing challenged power in the United States. For the decade following the *Brown* decision, this article seeks to understand fashion as an incisive political language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, and engaging activists. Clothing and dress are treated as an alternative archive, which provides a window into African American self-identity, self-representation, propriety, and political issues.

The article by Noelle Trent describes the efforts of museum-based historians to reach beyond institutional walls and address new audiences. If museums are to effectively reach audiences, they must design exhibits that attract visitors and impart an educational message. As with any museum program, the *Brown v. the Board of Education* exhibit became a collaborative effort. The National Museum of American History's *Brown* project was an important opportunity for the Smithsonian Institution to develop new links with community

organizations and activist networks. The objects served as an important backdrop to the powerfully told story of the advantages and disadvantages of desegregation in the years following the *Brown* decision.

Racism and segregation were not unique to the United States. Dr. Quito Swan examines the beliefs, laws, customs, and coercion that encouraged racism in Bermuda. The article notes that Black Bermudians were always extremely aware of the social conditions of the United States. Citizens from Bermuda traveled to the United States to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities and regularly met African Americans at church or various organizational meetings. This essay concludes that, in areas outside of North America, African Americans influenced the structure and provided inspiration to civil rights groups protesting segregation policies throughout the world.

Writing with methods and modes of analysis that bridge the split between history and politics, Mr. Joseph Robinson outlines the pivotal role of *Brown* in the life of one person. His essay details how one family pushed up against the constraints imposed by white supremacy, abandoned a lifestyle that was endemic to the South, and pushed his family northward. The son of parents who moved from North Carolina relates his beliefs on why the *Brown* decision provided an unparalleled assault on legalized segregation. He speaks directly to the ways the 1954 case questioned racism and the foundational premise of the southern society of his parents and grandparents. Although not primarily historical, this author's article powerfully demonstrates the ways ASALH members experience, write and relate history.

Among scholars who study contemporary culture, there is an interesting dialogue on the demise of African American life after *Brown*. These discussions blame the *Brown* decision and integration for many problems in the African American community today. Dr. William Cobb's

essay denounces the “phony” contemporary *Brown* era issues because he feels they avoid the real questions about quality of life improvements for African Americans in the fifty years following this historic decision. He compellingly challenges the simple, comfortable, and cosmetic issues and presents down-to-earth social and economic insight into the titanic forces unleashed after the 1954 decision.

For the years following the *Brown* decision, race remains the critical fault line in both the social and political arenas of the United States. The essays underscore the ways the *Brown* ruling went far beyond educational questions and the reasons why, after more than fifty years, discussions of the *Brown* decision has not abated. The volume draws our attention to people’s capacity to triumph over seemingly insurmountable barriers while inalterably transforming national and international views on the contours of race, class, cultural objects and ideology in history.

Notes

Raymond D’Angelo, *The American Civil Right Movement* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), xii; Glenn Feldman, *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), xi – xii; V. P. Franklin, “Introduction: *Brown v Board of Education – Fifty Years of Educational Change in the United States,*” *Journal of African American History* 90 (Winter – Spring 2005): 1 – 8; Peter Ling, *Gender and the Civil Right Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 1-13; Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *The Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003) ix-xvii; William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2004), 23-53.

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