

H-Net Reviews

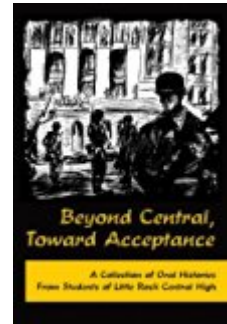
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mackie O'Hara, Alex Richardson, eds. *Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance: A Collection of Oral Histories from Students of Little Rock Central High*. Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2010. 253 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-935106-21-0.

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Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance began as a project in civics classes of Little Rock's Central High School, a location made famous by the desegregation efforts that required the intervention of the federal government in 1957. In an effort to engage students with the history of their school, teachers asked their students to interview someone who had participated in the American civil rights movement or had experienced some form of discrimination. These initial essays became part of a Web site known as the Memory Project, encouraged by teachers and developed and maintained by students (lrchmemory.org).

Beyond Central, Toward Acceptance is a manifestation of the Memory Project, created to encourage learners and educators to take on oral history projects. Three teachers at Little Rock Central High, George West, Keith Richardson, and Cynthia Nunnley, invited students to serve as the editors, providing them with the agency to decide which essays to include. In developing the project, the team decided to leave the essays in the original form, as much as possible. For instance, the essays were edited for clarity but not to change the language of interviewers or their participants.

Each of the five chapters begins with an editor's commentary and contains several short vignettes composed by students. The students selected their interviewees, and the collection has a diversity of perspectives in every chapter. Chapter 1, for example, focuses on the integration of Central High and includes an interview with Dr. Sybil Hampton, the first African American student to attend all three years at Central High and graduate.[1] Additionally, there are interviews with friends, classmates,

and children of the first African American students to attend Central High after it became an integrated high school in 1957, known as the Little Rock Nine. This chapter also acknowledges the difficulties of integration in the subsequent year. Governor Orval Faubus planned to close all four of Little Rock's high schools in 1958 to slow integration if a public vote supported that action. The Women's Emergency Committee (WEC) was founded to gather public support for desegregation; however, the public vote favored closing schools rather than integrating them, and the schools remained closed for the 1958 to 1959 school year. In May 1959, the school board voted not to renew the contracts of the teachers and administrators who they believed supported integration, which led to the formation of a group dedicated to renewing teachers' contracts and recalling the three segregationist board members. The group, known as Stop This Outrageous Purge (S.T.O.P.), worked with the WEC and succeeded in the recall election. Three board members were removed, and the schools were reopened in 1959. The chapter contains interviews with members of the WEC and S.T.O.P. who share these stories.[2]

Subsequent chapters place the narrative of discrimination in a broader context. Chapter 2 addresses integration issues in education that occurred beyond the confines of Central High, although most are situated in Arkansas. Chapter 3 explores discrimination outside of schools. Many participants described the everyday customs and hardships near the end of the Jim Crow period, offering perspectives on segregation and racism not only in Arkansas but also in other locations, from Massachusetts to New Mexico. Chapter 4 expands the narrative further to connect the American story of dis-

crimination to a broader transnational understanding of the topic, with interviews that make use of Little Rock's growing demographic diversity. Students interviewed individuals from a number of national origins, including China, Belarus, and Nicaragua, to emphasize that discrimination not only is based on race but also can occur in many forms. The closing chapter, "Toward Acceptance," is about activism in ways both large and small. Interviews in this section are from the perspectives of a Freedom Rider, a member of the United Farm Workers' Union, and a witness to the Tiananmen Square protests, among others.

The book is intended to function as an impetus for further oral history projects on similar threads as race and segregation. Therefore, it has learning tools from the project team, including discussion questions, a timeline of integration at Central High, and the lesson plans that developed the Memory Project. It would be beneficial to have more perspectives from the editors about the events of Little Rock, such as a broader initial essay to place the event in a national and transnational context for the readers and more developed essays at the beginning of each chapter.[3] If it is to function as a classroom text, the book would also benefit from a list of suggested readings for students about civil rights, discrimination, and activism. It could also include online resources that students could consult. These caveats aside, it is clear that the students who developed this project came to a greater understanding of history and the human experience. Not

only is the collection informative, but it should also inspire other schools to develop projects of their own, on topics connected with African Americans and education in U.S. history.

Notes

[1]. Ernest Green was a senior when Central High became an integrated high school in the fall of 1957. He was the first African American student to graduate from the school in May 1958, after attending for one year.

[2]. The counter-group, Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools (CROSS), is not represented.

[3]. Scholarly work on school desegregation includes Karen Anderson, *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Minnijean Brown, foreword to *Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis*, by John A. Kirk (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007); and Howell S. Baum, *Brown in Baltimore: School Desegregation and the Limits of Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). The importance of desegregation and its consequences for international relations is emphasized in Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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