

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amy Stuart Wells, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Anita Tijerina Revilla, Awo Korantemaa Atanda. *Both Sides Now: The Story of School Desegregation's Graduates*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xxi + 346 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25677-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25678-1.

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*Both Sides Now* begins with a revealing vignette about Larry Rubin. Now middle-aged, Rubin and his family of five live in a nice suburban area of New Jersey, in a home that would fit in “the pages of *House Beautiful*.” They have “a well-equipped minivan, and the American Dream of a large plot of land in a safe and secure suburb, far removed from the most vexing social problems of large cities and poorer communities” (p. 1). Yet Rubin is bothered by his childhood memories of the 1960s and 1970s. He is nagged by a keen sense that what his sons are now experiencing, attending schools in an affluent and mainly white community, was nothing like what he had experienced growing up. Indeed, Rubin grew up in Englewood, New Jersey (a suburban area close to New York City)—a “racially and socioeconomically diverse town not too far from his current home where he had far fewer amenities” than his family now has (p. 1). Rubin was part of a generation of students who attended racially desegregated high schools in the 1970s. In his case, he even attended a high school that had a majority African American student population. His recollections of playing on school sports teams, especially, and the friendships that ensued, are very positive. In the end, Rubin feels like he would never have had these experiences had he lived through any other time and/or gone to school anywhere else. And yet in his adult years, he returned to the largely homogeneous world of white and middle-class suburbia and lost touch with many of his old friends from high school. In some ways, then, though he enjoys his family life, he also seems to regret that his sons could not experience the same things he did through desegregated public education.

It is stories like Rubin’s, ripe as they are with ambiguities about the promises and failures of school desegregation in America, that make *Both Sides Now* a fascinating read. Authors Amy Stuart Wells, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Anita Tijerina Revilla, and Awo Korantemaa Atanda have compiled a complex portrait of experiences that catalogue the strengths and weaknesses of one of America’s most significant yet controversial social experiments in education: public school desegregation. It is no surprise to suggest that a good deal of discussion has taken place inside and outside of the academy about race and education over the last nearly sixty years since the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision of 1954. Based on five legal cases from around the country, the *Brown* decision (as it is often simply called) represented a watershed moment in the history of twentieth-century U.S. constitutional law. It helped set the stage for the dismantling of the country’s historic structures of racial segregation through to the post-civil rights and ostensibly “color-blind” future. Yet despite the extensive literature published since that time across many academic fields and from a litany of commentators, few studies exist that directly treat the social experiences of the students who participated and actually lived through school desegregation. Much like the well-known paradoxes of America’s racial history, “the stories of these graduates are double-sided, reflecting both how far we have come as a nation since the days of Jim Crow and how little progress we have made in moving toward an equal and integrated society” (p. 5). *Both Sides Now* sheds light on these missing perspectives.

The book is ambitiously built on a study of thousands

of hours of interviews with graduates who attended desegregated high schools in the late 1970s. This particular group made up the class of 1980 in six schools from six different cities around the United States. These included: Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Englewood; Pasadena, California; Topeka, Kansas; and Shaker Heights, Ohio. The authors chose these sites to show regional diversity and to reflect on important differences in histories of neighborhood change and demographics. They wanted to show how desegregation policy implementation differed across the country. For example, Dwight Morrow High, located in Englewood, became 57 percent African American through the mid-1970s but was “desegregated” through that period by receiving white students from the nearby and predominantly white and affluent community of Englewood Cliffs. Similarly, West Charlotte High School was desegregated through a court order that “created a district-wide” plan that “reassigned students from white high schools to” a historically black high school (pp. 42-43).

Each of the cases studied generally stand as important outliers to the usual stories of school desegregation in America. In these stories, especially in America’s major cities, African Americans, Latinos, and other people of color made the most sacrifices for desegregation policies by having to be bused, sometimes for great distances and at great personal expense, outside of their inner-city neighborhoods to attend schools in more affluent white communities. Yet even in the cases studied through *Both Sides Now*, more often than not it was also African Americans and Latinos who most found “their desegregated schooling experience dispiriting.” These experiences “too often underscored how separate and unequal their lives were outside school” (p. 6). Most graduates, no matter their background, generally also went on to adult lives, like Rubin’s, that were more racially isolated, especially in social terms. For blacks and Latinos, these experiences generally differed in so far as their high school experiences in desegregated schools prepared them for “integrated” workplaces. Most graduates agreed that their experiences had been “valuable” but that such experiences were not “sustainable” through “adulthood in a still-segregated society” (p. 7).

One of the more intriguing dynamics developed in the book is its discussion of how “color-blind” policies shaped curriculum and programs in desegregated schools. For example, most teachers and graduates interviewed felt that color blindness was “the central goal” for their schools in the late 1970s (p. 130). This ideology of color-blindness was not the same as the rhetoric co-opted by many right-wing ideologues through the 1980s and

1990s who felt that once discrimination against individuals was overcome, further redress of inequalities was not required. Still, in these schools, color-blindness did reflect a “powerful ideology,” which often “silenced discussions of race” (p. 130). For example, curriculum in these schools did little to address issues of racial inequality; many teachers neglected to include modules in African American history in social studies. Most teachers followed Eurocentric models of education even as school demographics changed. Schools in Austin, Englewood, and Pasadena did “acknowledge” black history months and Cinco de Mayo—the latter a celebration of Mexican heritage observed annually throughout the Americas. But in these cases, “celebrations were about pageantry and performance and not about deeper discussions” (p. 142). Beyond this focus on color-blindness, desegregated schools also affirmed the racial privileges of white students. The authors contend that when “two or more” ethnic/racial groupings are brought together “with little conscious effort to consider the terms upon which they will coexist within the same space, the group with the most power and status in the larger context—whites—will, unless they are in the minority, dominate academically, socially, and culturally within the desegregated school or organization” (p. 96).

Yet there was also an overarching perspective of a lost cause expressed by many of school desegregation’s graduates. This was encapsulated in the reflections of Muir High School (in Pasadena) graduate Geri Delgado. In essence, Delgado felt that those who worked on federal educational policy had not stuck with desegregation “‘long enough’ ” (p. 319). Indeed, most graduates of desegregated schools felt that the project they had participated in as teenagers had been worth the experience and, more important, had accomplished something unique in American educational history.

Overall, this book offers some valuable case studies based on in-depth oral history research. It would be useful to scholars and students of critical race studies and education especially, but also to general audiences interested in similar issues. It would be interesting to see future studies that offer an equally rich array of interviews from graduates who went to school in other medium-sized cities around the United States to get a better sense of how school desegregation was carried out in even more diverse contexts. Still, the case studies selected for this study clearly offer a revealing snapshot of Americans’ experiences with these flawed and fleeting but (even by today’s standards) still innovative educational experiments aimed at redressing historic racial inequalities.

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