

35 Checkerboard Segregation in the 1950s

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Rocky, a summertime playmate who lived in the apartment building next door to our turn-of-the-century single-family residence, walked west to Clark Elementary School in the fall of 1953 while I walked east to Washington Elementary School. Rocky was "white" and I was "colored," in the school district's lexicon. But other black children in our neighborhood walked north to Saint Mark's Catholic School, because some cardinal had ordered those schools desegregated. My cousin, who was blind, went to the Missouri School for the Blind, which, I had discovered by attending a Christmas play, had both white and black children in the same classroom.

I used to think that going shopping had to include eating lunch at a department store restaurant or a dime-store lunch counter. I remember dressing up, riding the bus, shopping, and eating out as a preventive strike against the racial affronts in our "transitional neighborhood" on the western edge of St. Louis in the early 1950s. Perhaps my parents thought lunch out downtown would keep me from asking why we could not go to the restaurants in our neighborhood along what was then US Highway 67. But I knew that the signs, "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone," in those eating establishments along Highway 67 were really meant for blacks.

I remember my older siblings discussing the ability of Lena Horne, the famous fair-skinned black singer, to "pass" under certain circumstances by staying at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel when she was performing there. We could not eat in the restaurant, not to mention rent a room if we had the money, in this luxury hotel less than a mile from our house on the edge of the Forest Park. City parks were not segregated in my memory, but city-owned hospitals were. This checkerboard pattern of legal segregation and private exclusion and inclusion confused my nine-year-old mind, but its purpose was clear: to denigrate my sense of self.

The family lore is that my parents migrated to St. Louis with the hope that each of their children would have the chance for a college education, which both my parents had somehow managed to obtain through the largesse

of family in the 1920s. I don't know whether they envisioned a future in St. Louis without legal segregation when they uprooted their eight children from rural Arkansas three months before my birth in 1944. But my parents appeared ready for the changes that were implemented immediately after *Brown* was announced in May 1954. One of my older brothers, Harold, transferred from the black Charles Sumner High School to the formerly white Soldan High School in the fall of 1954 without much fanfare or apparent display of apprehension on his or my parents' part.

Sometime in the fall of 1954, my fifth-grade teacher, Miss Razz, announced that there were no longer "black" or "white" schools—they were all made of the same brick—but that some of the children in our school would be reassigned to other schools the following year. When she mentioned that some teachers, including her, might be assigned to another school, my heart skipped a beat. I guess my heart and soul took a recess from racial politics to develop a crush on my exotic teacher, who had lived briefly in Japan. I just could not imagine Washington Elementary without the beautiful but demanding Miss Razz. I had assumed that, given the close proximity of Washington Elementary to our house, I would not be reassigned.

My assumption was based on my observations, what I overheard adults and older siblings discuss over dinner, and what I read in the newspapers, including the weekly black press. But my ten-year-old mind could not perceive the entire plan for the voluntary desegregation of schools in the city of St. Louis. The high schools were desegregated in the fall of 1954, and the elementary schools (there were no middle or junior high schools at the time) would desegregate in the fall of 1955. The plan also included the imposition of a system of educational tracking that would begin with sixth-graders in the fall of 1955 and be fully implemented in the high schools in 1958. The elementary track was designed to divide elementary schoolchildren into two classes—the gifted, based on intelligence tests, and the remainder. Miss Razz recommended that I be one of the fifth-graders tested. My parents received a letter informing them that I had been offered a spot in the gifted class at Bates Elementary, a school in the far northeast part of town—a black section of town.

I don't remember the family decision-making process that led to the conclusion that I could make the hour-long trip on public transportation in order to attend the gifted class. But there had been a Palmer tradition of children riding the school bus, with older siblings riding the bus to school before Washington Elementary was converted to a colored school in the late 1940s. The bus trip seemed preferable to an alternative Miss Razz had mentioned: that I attempt to obtain a scholarship to one of the private schools such as Thomas Jefferson or John Burroughs that admitted highly qualified black students. I recall already at this time my name being connected to places like Washington University in St. Louis and Harvard.

I don't remember much of the summer of 1955, except a practice bus ride to Bates Elementary with either an older sibling or one of my parents. I am certain I participated in the Vacation Reading Club at the local branch of the public library that summer because I still have the certificate—thanks to my mother, who catalogued all my academic achievements—indicating I had read at least fifteen books. Technically, the certificate attested that I had checked out at least fifteen books, but I am certain that I read at least fifteen and perhaps twice as many because my mother had regularly assigned reading times for me and my younger brother each day during the summer.

I also don't recall any discussion about the anticipated racial composition of my class or the racial background of my new teacher. Enhanced educational opportunities for Palmer children seemed to have been the norm in our household. My second-eldest brother, Willie, had completed teachers' college and was already a public school teacher. Another older brother, Mac, had won scholarships to attend college upon graduation from Charles Sumner High School in 1952. My sister, Lela, had won a scholarship to nursing school after graduation from the same high school. Harold, my brother who had transferred to Soldan High, was continuing to perform academically as expected, and had one of the highest grade point averages in his class. My college-educated parents—Arkansas Baptist College in my father's case, and Lane College in my mother's—expected academic achievement from their children.

The big surprise on my first day in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* school world was my teacher, George H. Hiram. Not only was he male, but also he had just returned from the Sorbonne in Paris where he had been a Fulbright scholar. He was in the process of finishing his doctorate in education at St. Louis University. As he began to explain how his research—teaching systematic logic to elementary school children—related to what our academic program would be like, I became very excited. French lessons, logic exercises, classroom visits from professors at the various universities in the city, trips to the St. Louis Symphony, and a lot of homework seemed what I had been waiting for all my elementary school years. He then explained that he would be our teacher until we graduated and went on to high school.

Hiram discussed the racial composition of our class—twenty-one black students and one white girl, Cynthia—implying that there had been some deliberate racial gerrymandering. All but one of the twenty-two black sixth-graders admitted into the gifted program had been assigned to Bates Elementary. Cynthia had originally been assigned to a gifted class in another school, but her parents had fought with school officials to have her assigned to our class, which was in fact nearer to her home. Cynthia's parents lived in what was then a black neighborhood in a duplex with their lifelong friends, a black couple. Without her parents' victory over the school bureaucracy and the innuendos that she—a high-IQ white girl—could not learn from a black male

teacher in an otherwise all-black classroom, my post-*Brown* reassignment would have been just another Palmer child reassigned to another school in the gerrymandered lines marking the changing housing patterns in St. Louis after War World II. We had little interaction with the other students in the school, but I believe Cynthia was the only white student in the entire school.

Our entire gifted class, with Hiram as our teacher, was moved in the fall of 1956 to Washington Elementary School, transformed into a newly constructed school instead of the turn-of-the century building I had attended across the street.

Dr. Hiram—as he insisted upon being called upon receipt of his doctorate of education in the spring 1956—was clearly on a mission: to prove through his tutelage or academic dictatorship that the racist bureaucrats were wrong regarding the potential of his students. First, despite the fact we had no contact with students in other gifted classes, Dr. Hiram set the academic bar for us as being the best gifted class. It started with French. According to the school board's plans, instruction in French was to begin in the seventh grade, fall 1956. But we began our French lessons at Bates in the fall of 1955. Hiram, who spoke fluent French, had obviously studied the French educational system. He started us with the first-grade reader used in France (obtained from Paris through his contacts) and dictation in French. When Mrs. Douglas, a native-born Parisian, arrived at Washington Elementary for our first formal class in French she was obviously delighted to find a group of children who knew the rudiments of French and could say, "Bonjour, Madame Douglas," with the proper Parisian accent. She and Hiram, who spoke French to each other, must have conspired to ignore the school board's planned curriculum and moved us along to conjugating verbs, learning grammar, and taking constant dictation to develop our ear for the language.

Second, Hiram's notion of homework would make graduate school seem easy. My still lifelong friend Cynthia gave me a copy a few years ago of Hiram's notion of homework during the Easter vacation. Cynthia's schedule indicates that we were to have a Sunday off from any form of academic work during the vacation. Otherwise, we were to spend from two to four hours a day studying.

For instance, on Sunday April 12 we were to:

- 1 Read Article VI of the U.S. Constitution and write answers for all the questions.
- 2 Read part of a chapter in the textbook for history.
- 3 Read nearly twenty pages of the science text and make a written list of all the main ideas.
- 4 Read some assignment in Current Events, a weekly publication for school-age children.
- 5 Read a portion of a book that had been assigned for the week.

According to Cynthia's notes, the prize was no homework at all on Easter Sunday.

In retrospect, none of this seemed particularly onerous to me because Hiram had introduced the idea that I apply for a scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy early in the winter of 1957. In one of his many talks to the class, he described the school and discussed with the entire class the academic, personal, and social weaknesses and strengths as students of each potential candidate, including me. He shared with us the outline of his tentative decision-making process for selecting which boys he would not recommend for a scholarship and which ones he would. Despite my family's lack of firm middle-class standing, he indicated that he was going to discuss the school with my parents and the parents of two other boys, one of whom was the son of a dentist.

I could not imagine why anyone, especially my parents, would question the judgment of Hiram. After all, Hiram was Dr. George Hiram, the consummate intellectual, in my eyes, who knew about the demise of colonialism in Africa from his contacts at the Sorbonne. If Hiram told my parents I could attend a party of a school friend that required me to miss their appointed bedtime, I went to the party. If Hiram thought I should go to boarding school, what earthly creature could question him? Apparently, no one did publicly, and the preparation for my application to Exeter began while a family storm erupted over Hiram's plans for me.

Hiram's plans for his academic stars meant, however, there may well have been other students who were simply terrorized by his method of taking total control over our lives. Either way, we were either the pawns or the beneficiaries of his zeal for academic achievement. Perhaps he knew what we could only surmise—that when we entered a large city high school (most of them had about three thousand students), we would be put in an academic track. The regular tracks were I, II, and III, but the elementary children in the so-called gifted class were slated to go into Track I-A, the top or super track. Either by conscious design or as a byproduct of his research and teaching, Hiram was molding us to be the top students in Track I-A, where we would finally meet some of our gifted white counterparts from other parts of the city.

Thirteen members of our class, including me, graduated in January 1958—students were allowed to enter school in either January or September in the early 1950s. So although some of us were technically in Eight High while others were in Eight Low, we had been treated the same until it came time for testing for high school placements. When the standardized test scores came back for placements in the high school tracks, the top ten scores in the entire city were in our class, with Cynthia ranked as the top student in the city. Since I was among the ten top-ranking students, I did not worry about how the other three students in Eight High might have felt. I was more preoccupied with whether I would win acceptance and a scholarship to Exeter or

how I might fare in a high school with over three thousand black and white students.

A few weeks into high school made me relieved to receive my acceptance from Exeter with a full scholarship. Our Track I-A teachers were all white females who had been reassigned to high school when the two public teachers' colleges in the city had merged as part of the desegregation plan. Our French teacher resented our ability to correct her poor accent whenever she attempted to speak French to us, so she gave up trying. My English teacher seemed to respect my abilities and praised me to my parents, but presented *Pride and Prejudice* in such a way as to take out all the passion from Jane Austen. My mathematics teacher must have been fairly good or unable to destroy what Hiram had taught me because I ended up in second-year math at Exeter the next fall. But my goal was clear: Obtain Honors—the grade above A's—in my courses and escape to Exeter.

In contrast to the decision to let me go to Bates Elementary, the family decision making over whether to accept the full scholarship from Exeter was not a black and white one. My father came to see Hiram as not only stealing his son, but also sending him off into a hostile all-white-male environment without any family protection. My mother saw Exeter as the road to Harvard and professional success and was sure I could handle myself in that environment even though I was physically small. They argued constantly in my presence, with my father insisting I was not going. My two older brothers intervened on my behalf. They pleaded, begged, and in one case even cried, in order to convince my father he should let me have this educational opportunity despite the racial risks.

I took the train by myself to Exeter in the fall 1958. I would read about the Little Rock and the New Orleans school ordeals from the library of a mostly white and all-male private school in New Hampshire. Of the 125 boys in the ninth grade, there were four blacks—two of us from Hiram's class, another scholarship boy from New York, and the son of the owner of a black newspaper from Baltimore.

In retrospect, I remember some adults such as my parents and Cynthia's parents preparing their children for the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* world where there would be no legal racial segregation. But most adults in St. Louis, both black and white, were probably trying to hold on to something they thought of as precious in the pre-*Brown* world through a combination of private inclusion and exclusion as manifest in housing and social patterns. I remember some of the private institutions—the department stores in downtown St. Louis and some private schools like those in St. Louis and Exeter—doing more to break down the walls of racial exclusion than the public schools did.

I think often about how my two-and-a-half-year tutelage under Hiram changed the course of my life by providing the path to Exeter. Hiram was

more like my teachers at Exeter—highly educated, demanding, and passionate about learning—but he also carried the burden of being black in an educational system designed to destroy young black minds and deprive a brilliant black teacher of his passion for learning. But in the confusing pattern of racial exclusion and inclusion of my childhood, I always try to remember that not everyone, black or white, was as protected from the emotional and spiritual bruises of racial segregation as I was by the combination of the examples of Hiram's zest for teaching and learning, my older siblings' academic achievement, and the calm demeanor of my parents as I ventured into the white world after *Brown*.

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