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One for the Crows, One for the Crackers: The Strange Career of Public Higher Education in Houston, Texas

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One for the Crows, One for the Crackers:
The Strange Career of Public Higher Education in Houston, Texas.

by
Amilcar Shabazz


The Houston Review, published three times a year, was founded in the spring of 1979 by the Houston Metropolitan Research Center and published by the Houston Public Library Board. James M. Poteet first edited the periodical, which focuses on the history and culture of the Gulf Coast area of Texas. Louis Machiafava was the editor in 1998 when this peer-reviewed article was published. The new Houston History magazine replaced the Houston Review in 2003 and has had a new name since 2007.

Houston History, a triannual magazine published by the Center for Public History at the University of Houston, is the voice of history and culture throughout the Houston area. It aims to provide Houstonians with the opportunity to learn about all aspects of Houston's history. The articles published will seek to educate and entertain while exploring important aspects of Houston’s history and culture.

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As surprising as it might seem to those who see the university as a liberal
force, the presence of institutions of higher education has not always served to
mitigate racial domination or the cultural separateness that dominates the
personality of cities like Houston. The title of Andrew Hacker’s best-selling book
Two Nations could scale down to the local level and still ring true: “Two
Houstonians: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal.” Actually, with its
large Latin and Asian American communities, “Four Houstonians” would be more
accurate. A kind of cultural apartheid is as distinct to the city as its Astrodome,
medical center, space exploration and oil businesses, and its bayous. Houston, like
Texas, emerged from a war between an Anglo Protestant-dominated cultural
group against a mestizo Catholic cultural group and a captive African cultural
group. The culture wars continue to the present while the intellectual resources of
Texas and Houston, especially their university historians, persist in their failure
to shed light on the ongoing conflict between the races or cultural groups.

Historical exposition is uniquely suited to delineate a great deal about the
dynamics of Houston’s cultural fragmentation, yet it refuses to meet the task.
Political scientists, sociologists, and other academic disciplines have written most
of the important publications that analyze the structural and cultural dimensions of
ethnocentrism and white supremacy in the metropolis. There are many reasons,
both internal and external in nature, that we know, for example, more about
Houston’s growth into a major oil refining region than we do about its becoming
America’s largest “Jim Crow” city. Certainly one factor that cannot be
overlooked is that Houston’s institutions of higher learning are themselves deeply
connected to the social structures, behavioral norms, and mentalities that produce
the splintered social consciousness that characterizes the city as a whole. In the
man, the teachers who might historicize the issue drive home to racially
homogenous neighborhoods, praise God in racially homogenous houses of
worship, school their children in largely monochrome, monocultural, and
monolingual schools, and do not think twice about it. Their participation in a
culturally separate world frames their approach to contemporary and historical
issues and, it may be argued, has led them to avoid serious analysis of the city’s
color line.

A worthy point of departure for a journey into the complex nature of
Houston’s poly-cultural reality is the strange emergence of publicly supported
higher education in the city. Any visitor must be struck immediately by the
existence of two public universities sitting across the street from each other. A
brief tour of the two campuses gives the impression that state-sanctioned
segregation still lingers in one of the United States’ top ten cities. Upon learning
about the two institutions, students in university classrooms naively ask: “If we
are for racial integration and pluralism why have we not merged Texas Southern
University (TSU) and the University of Houston (UH)?” “Why do we taxpayers
fund TSU, UH, and the University of Houston-Downtown (UH-D) — it seems
like a big waste of resources to maintain three universities doing almost the same
thing?” The continued funding of these traditionally black and white schools
makes absolutely no sense to the unmilitated and is senseless without a historical
perspective. A survey of the history of segregated public higher education in
Houston may help to clarify some of the positions and passions that rise over what
is known as the TSU-UH merger debate.

In 1927, when the Houston Independent School District (HISD) opened
Houston Colored Junior College (HCJC) and Houston Junior College (HJC),
the respective antecedent institutions of TSU and UH, the two institutions represented
one school with two campuses. One campus served Jim Crow, that is to say the
educational needs of black folks; while the other served Joe Cracker, that is to say
the needs of the lowly white folks who could not get into the private colleges
which operated in the city. The for-whites-only HISD board set overall policy and
administered the finances of the two racially distinct campuses for almost two
decades. Hitherto, the small amount of historical writing on TSU and UH,
especially their early years, has studied their histories separately and typically has
been boosteristic rather than analytical. Such an orientation has prevented the
development of an analysis of how concerns with ethnicity, race, and both an
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As surprising as it might seem to those who see the university as a liberal force, the presence of institutions of higher education has not always served to mitigate racial domination or the cultural separateness that characterizes the city as a whole. In the main, the teachers who might historicize the issue drive home to racially homogenous neighborhoods, praise God in racially homogenous houses of worship, school their children in largely monochrome, multicultural and monolingual schools, and do not think twice about it. Their participation in a culturally separate world frames their approach to contemporary and historical issues and, it may be argued, has led them to avoid serious analysis of the city’s color line.

A worthy point of departure for a journey into the complex nature of Houston’s poly-cultural reality is the strange emergence of publicly supported higher education in the city. Any visitor must be struck immediately by the existence of two public universities sitting across the street from each other. A brief tour of the two campuses gives the impression that state-sanctioned segregation still lingers in one of the United States’ top ten cities. Upon learning about the two institutions, students in university classrooms naively ask: “If we are for racial integration and pluralism why have we not merged Texas Southern University (TSU) and the University of Houston (UH)?” “Why do we taxpayers fund TSU, UH, and the University of Houston-Downtown (UH-D) — it seems like a big waste of resources to maintain three universities doing almost the same thing?” The continued funding of these traditionally black and white schools makes absolutely no sense to the uninstructed and is senseless without a historical perspective. A survey of the history of segregated public higher education in Houston may help to clarify some of the positions and passions that rise over what is known as the TSU-UH merger debate.

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Houston. Through the use of official university records, oral interviews, newspaper accounts and other primary and secondary sources on TSU, UH, and race relations in Houston, Texas, it is possible, however, to outline the uniquely interconnected histories of these schools through the era of legal segregation and after.

For more than five decades prior to 1927, black Texans labored to create and sustain hundreds of schools, several private colleges, and one state normal institute at Prairie View, through which they steadily reduced the numbers in their communities who could not read or write. They did this even as they were marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of civil society, specifically from participating in school governance, financial and academic administration, curriculum development, and other aspects of educational leadership down to simple matters such as textbook selection. The belief in the bogus ideas of white supremacy constructed black folks, in the minds of white folks, as a perpetual outside group, a permanent enemy or antagonist. Instead of African Americans increased exposure to the education and “culture” of the dominant Anglo-American majority, leading to their assimilation into full-fledged citizenship and inclusion within the larger society, black Texans discovered that something in the social system reproduced their subordinate “place” generation after generation regardless of their level of educational attainment. Something was wrong with the melting pot. Color prejudice, ethnic chauvinism, and racism influenced the cultural function of the schools such that they contributed to producing not one type of American, but several different types. Their type, moreover, the “colored” or “Negro” American, persistently found itself ranked among the lowest of the various types.

Through the Constitution of 1876, the state’s formal educational policy statement was that “separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored children and impartial provision shall be made for both.” For white Texans to spend more on the education of their children compared to that spent on the education of black children did not, by the white supremacist’s logic, furnish evidence of bias or partiality. After all, what was the state’s purpose for providing blacks with schooling? Was it to make them the equal of whites? Year after year, whites made it explicitly clear that the purpose of black schools had nothing to do with creating blacks who were the social or intellectual equals of themselves. Furthermore, if the function of black schools was, as they would have it, to teach an inferior group and to teach that group to accept its inferiority, such schooling should not cost as much as the instruction of the superior group. How else could a Texan reason that spending more money schooling a white child over a black child did not go against the stated law of “impartial provision” of education?

Whatever assumptions governed the administration of public education in Houston from its origins as a municipal concern in 1877 well into the 1920s when the city established the forerunners of TSU and UH, ethnic inequality was an unambiguous and undisguised fact. Jesse O. Thomas’s *A Study of Social Welfare Status of the Negroes in Houston, Texas* (1929) offers a synopsis of how white and “colored” public education functioned in Houston. Members of the Houston Urban League commissioned him to write this book-length examination of the living conditions of black Houstonians. In the area of education, Thomas cited HISD Superintendent Edison Ellsworth Oberholtzer’s report for the school year 1927-28, to disclose that the value of the school property as quoted was $16,544,902.00 for the 68 white schools and $278,068.00 for the 25 colored schools, a difference of $16,266,834.00, according to information from the Business Manager ... Although the white population was only three times that of the Negro and the number of white schools less than three times the number of schools for colored, the value of the white schools was nearly sixty times that of the Negro schools.

He also noted that the per capita cost of educating a white pupil was $47.36 in the 1928-29 academic year while that of a “colored” pupil was $25.55, “a difference of $21.81.” Moreover, the district did not pay the same salaries to white and black teachers with the same training, experience, and job functions. Black educators received approximately three-fifths to two-thirds of the salaries paid to whites of comparable ability and job classification.

Despite the unequal conditions, Thomas found reason to be optimistic and positive about the status of black public education in Houston, noting proudly that the city was the only one “in the South which has a Municipal Junior College for Negroes.” He also praised Oberholtzer as a man with a “sense of justice and courage,” who in his previous capacity as superintendent of public schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma, had no problem with the fact that “the Negroes receive[d] exactly the same salary as [was] paid to other teachers.” Thomas tried to balance his arguments and be discreet and sympathetic vis-à-vis the political status quo in his criticisms and recommendations. In some places, particularly his analysis of crime and the black community, Thomas placed greater emphasis on alleged deficiencies in the character and activities of blacks than on the structural and economic factors.
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In any case, Thomas’s assessment of Superintendent Oberholzer’s courage and sense of justice in confronting the problems that faced the education of blacks in the South reveals a manifestation of the then current white liberalism. Many white Texans marched in white sheets through the streets for white supremacy and revolted against a variety of changes in ‘modern’ moral customs they felt beset them on all sides. Might not the school district’s attention to the educational needs of black people, particularly the simultaneous creation of junior colleges for whites and blacks, have appeared to white supremacists as threatening to the old order of things? The establishment of segregated HCJC and HJC within the bounds of custom, however, it was quite unusual for blacks and whites to get junior colleges at the same time. Whites were the first to get a secondary school in 1878 when the Houston High School was founded. Blacks did not secure a high school until 1892.

As soon as blacks learned that white district officials had begun making plans to launch HJC, they began presenting petitions to the school board and Superintendent Oberholzer for a junior college for blacks. A committee of Houston’s major black educational leaders, including the great M. E. B. Isaacs and William Leonard Davis, argued that their race had as great or more pressing a demand for college courses than did whites. Initially, district officials responded negatively. They doubted that blacks from the city and surrounding areas could ensure a sufficient enrollment, especially with the State College for blacks at Prairie View being only sixty miles away. The committee, however, did not give up and continued to implore HISD board members to study the two-year track record of the Wiley-Prairie View Extension School that had operated with board approval in the classrooms of Houston’s Colored High School.

Black and white educational leaders agreed that establishing the HCJC could help improve the education of black children by enabling their teachers to acquire better academic and professional training. On this longstanding problem, Thomas Jesse Jones, the sociologist and educator who directed a federal government study on the character of African-American schooling from 1914 to 1916, stated that “the most urgent need of the colored schools of Texas is for trained teachers.” In Houston, black teachers (like many of their white counterparts) recognized their need for additional training, but only a few could afford to leave the city during their summers to further their professional development.

At the March 7, 1927, meeting of the HISD Board of Education, the trustees stated it as their belief “that a Junior College can be made to render a most valuable service to our public school system for providing training for teachers in and for our schools at a nominal cost and in a convenient manner and at a convenient time, and ... operated on a self-sustaining basis on a comparatively low tuition cost.” Board members felt this way about public higher education for whites, but they did not, however, resolve that a permanent junior college should be created for blacks. Subsequently, the Isaacs-Davis committee arranged to meet with Assistant Superintendent L. T. Cunningham, director of school census and attendance, “to plan for the founding of the Colored Junior College.”

The HCJC held its first day of classes on June 5, 1927, in the new Jack Yates High School with three hundred students and a predominately white faculty from the University of Texas and Sam Houston State Teachers College. The white HJC opened two days later in the auditorium of the San Jacinto High School, enrolling 232 students by the end of the summer term. Despite the “colored” junior college’s auspicious beginning, district officials remained unconvinced as to whether they should continue to operate the school throughout the regular academic year or permit it to function as a summer institute. After Cunningham conducted a survey which indicated that more than eighty students would “take advantage of the college when it is opened. This fall, on a tuition basis,” board members agreed to provide a “negro” junior college, but only “when enrollment is assured.” Effectively, because the HISD made no financial commitment to the black junior college, it was to be an entirely self-sustaining institution.

As the faculty of both Houston junior college campuses (which in the fall numbered twenty-one at HJC and six at HCJC) came under a supervisory arrangement with the University of Texas and Sam Houston State Teachers College, the two senior colleges had to approve their participation on a year-to-year basis. In the spring of 1928, following visits from representatives of the Texas Association of Colleges and the State Department of Education, HJC gained full accreditation and that fall it became the state’s largest junior college. That next year, the HCJC received an “unconditional first class rating by the State Department of Education,” and with that achievement the strange career of public higher education in Houston truly had begun.

The white and black administrators and enthusiasts of both junior colleges quickly recognized that in order for these institutions to survive and grow they had to broaden their student base and attract others besides those seeking teacher training. For HCJC the reality of an economic structure that had little need for blacks with higher education compounded the problem of defining its mission.
In any case, Thomas’s assessment of Superintendent Oberholzer’s courage and sense of justice in confronting the problems that faced the education of blacks in the South reveals a manifestation of the then current white liberalism. Many white Texans marched in white sheets through the streets for white supremacy and revolted against a variety of changes in ‘modern’ moral customs they felt beset them on all sides. Might not the school district’s attention to the educational needs of black people, particularly the simultaneous creation of junior colleges for whites and blacks, have appeared to white supremacists as threatening to the old order of things? The establishment of segregated HCJC and HJC was within the bounds of custom, however, it was quite unusual for blacks and whites to get junior colleges at the same time. Whites were the first to get a secondary school in 1878 when the Houston High School was founded. Blacks did not secure a high school until 1892.

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In 1880, eighty four percent of blacks had been employed in low-wage jobs that required little or no education. This situation remained substantially unaltered for more than sixty years.  

Raphael O’Hara Lanier, the dean of HCJIC from 1933-1938, followed the program of the old wizard of Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington. He prescribed a curriculum for HCJIC that stressed vocational education training and added to the curricula a course in tailoring, home economics, and cleaning and pressing. Since most Negroes in Houston at this time were domestic employees, he felt that they should be skillful in the jobs they must do for a living.

HCJIC also established a vocational program in addition to its teacher training and junior college course offerings, and it and HCJIC grew steadily until 1930, when the full brunt of the Great Depression caused attendance at the junior colleges to drop. In 1934, the HISD board of education fought back against the declining numbers by taking advantage of a state law that enabled it to elevate both schools into senior colleges. In the fall of that year, the University of Houston (UH) and, in the summer of 1935, the Houston College for Negroes (HCN) opened their doors as four-year institutions. The HISD’s action halted the downward trend in enrollments at both HCN and UH, at least until the U.S. entered the Second World War in 1941.

Offering a four-year degree did not, however, mean that HCN assumed greater autonomy over its internal operation. The HISD school board continued to take responsibility for the overall governance of the black branch campus. As in HCN’s preceding seven years as a junior college, Superintendent Oberholtzer served as president of both UH and HCN, and Walter W. Kemmerer served as Assistant to the President. The head Negro in charge of HCN took the title of Dean of Houston College of Negroes. At a curricular level, all HCN course descriptions and outlines were sent to Kemmerer for approval. White central administrative oversight did not, however, directly tie HCN’s accreditation to UH’s. The black school’s rating remained as distinct and separate from UH as its facilities.

The relationship between UH and HCN did have trouble spots. The total separation of facilities received a challenge at least as early as 1944. Four years earlier, UH had effected its move from San Jacinto High School to a new campus for all of its own. HCN remained, however, at Yates High School until 1945. As the small number of students who entered the black college’s first graduate degree program—the Master of Science in Education—began writing their theses or otherwise doing research work, the inadequacy of the Yates High School/HCN library became a serious issue. They made numerous appeals to HCN’s graduate council, and three white members in January of 1945 wrote Kemmerer recommending that he establish “some procedure” through which black students might use UH’s library facilities. They suggested that a room be set aside where HCN graduate students could come at a time “when few of our regular students use the building.” Kemmerer refused their recommendation saying that he was "wholly in sympathy with the purpose; however, I do not believe the plan you suggested is at all practical or feasible." His alternative, that the HCN library requisition and purchase the needed books and periodicals, proved even less feasible.

Kemmerer’s intransigence regarding segregation had its opposite in the form of blacks who had begun to adopt a “no quarter” attitude toward all institutions born of Jim Crow. Heman Sweatt, Lulu B. and Julius White, Rev. Albert A. Lucas, James Jernson, Christa Adair, Mack Hannah, Jr., Hobart S. Taylor, and Carter Wesley capitalized on Dr. Lonnie Smith’s successful legal challenge to the whites-only Democratic primary following a favorable 1944 Supreme Court decision. By that next year they had built the city’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch into the largest in the world with a dues-paying membership of more than 12,000. They projected a new self-image for black Houstonians, one that differed sharply from the odious epitaph of “Jim Crow Niggers” which A. Philip Randolph used against blacks, whom he saw as willing to accept segregation, especially separate schools.

Moving from the ballot box to the educational arena as their next battleground, the next year the group in the fight against white supremacy, Houston’s anti-Jim Crow Negroes rallied behind Sweatt’s February 1946 application to the University of Texas Law School. Thousands of dollars poured into the NAACP fund to finance the legal work of Texas-based attorney William J. Durham and special counsel Thurgood Marshall, most of it raised in the Houston area. Many supported the case as a way to protest the failure of state government to provide a black equivalent to the esteemed University of Texas.

The NAACP and an emerging group of civil libertarians in the state pushed Sweatt’s case in the direction of a direct assault on segregated education. Both sides received some of what they wanted: In March 1947, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 140 that approved the establishment of a three-million-dollar Negro UT. Thus, HCN became the state-supported Texas State University for Negroes (TSUN) with a law school and plans for various graduate
In 1880, eight-four percent of Blacks had been employed in low-wage jobs that required little or no education. This situation remained substantially unaltered for more than sixty years. The relationship between UH and HCN had always been fraught with tension and conflict. UH had attempted to distance itself from HCN since its inception, and this desire to maintain its identity as a predominantly white institution had only intensified over the years. The HCN board of trustees, dominated by white members, had consistently refused to extend the same privileges to HCN as were granted to UH. This situation came to a head in 1927, when HCN's board of trustees voted to close the institution, citing financial difficulties. UH, however, refused to accept responsibility for the financial crisis and demanded that the state assume control of the campus. This demand led to a clash between the two institutions, culminating in a lawsuit that dragged on for years. Despite this legal battle, HCN remained open, but its future was uncertain. The situation was further complicated by the Great Depression, which hit Texas hard and forced many institutions to cut back on their operations. HCN was no exception, and its enrollments began to decline. This downward trend continued through the 1930s, and by 1940, the institution was facing financial ruin. In response, the state legislature passed a bill that would merge HCN with UH, effectively ending HCN's existence as a separate institution. This move was met with resistance from HCN's white constituents, who feared that their institution would lose its identity in the process. Despite this opposition, the merger went forward, and HCN became a part of the University of Houston system. The merger was a turning point for HCN, and it marked the beginning of a new chapter in the institution's history. The new institution would continue to face challenges, but it would also have access to the resources and opportunities that come with being a part of a larger university system.
divisions including a medical school. On the other hand, the U.S. Supreme Court found that this Negro UT did not satisfy the constitutional question posed by Heman Sweatt's suit and on June 5, 1950, ordered the University of Texas law school to admit its first black student. 25

The wartime industry expansion of employment in the Gulf Coast area combined with the postwar influx of veterans who could attend college with the aid of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act brought about a tremendous boom in student enrollment at UH and TSUN. The war and its aftermath also helped spur a new wave of civil rights struggles, one increasingly dominated by liberal integrationists who openly professed little or no interest in "Negro education" or the welfare of so-called Negro schools such as TSUN.

The NAACP came to represent the spearhead of the civil rights-integration crusade in Texas, and it strove to dominate the field of political action among blacks. Houston NAACP leaders Carter Wesley and Lulu B. White engaged in a bitter word-war in the late 1940s. Wesley defended a flexible, multi-pronged attack on Jim Crow while White argued for an all-or-nothing approach. Wesley correctly assessed that TSU and Prairie View A&M University would continue for many years to be the major providers of higher educational opportunity for black Texans and, thus, efforts to upgrade these campuses had to be sought simultaneously with the fight to integrate white universities. While, however, was prepared to see the historically black universities closed immediately as the surest way of ending racial discrimination and separateness in Texas higher education.

An interesting outcome of this controversy among black activists in Houston is that the city became one of the most racially docile of Texas cities in the 1950s. The city that had been a leader in the fight against the white primary, teacher pay equalization, and which had provided the plaintiff who sued to open UT at the graduate and professional school level, suddenly became inordinately quiet and passive. The local NAACP seemed unable to get beyond mere plans into action with the exception of one noteworthy anti-segregation rally that targeted Texas governor Allan Shivers when he visited the TSU campus on March 18, 1956. They never effectively mounted lawsuits to integrate UH, Rice University, The University of Saint Thomas, TSU, or other segregated colleges in the city.

Following Sweatt's lawsuit, blacks sued or initiated suits to open institutions of higher education in Wichita Falls, Victoria, Wharton, El Paso, Kingsville, Gainesville, Beaumont, Denton, Canyon, Lubbock, Arlington, Texarkana, San Marcos, College Station, Huntsville, and Kilgore. Houston, however, with its large and powerful NAACP branch, was conspicuously free of any legal challenges at the collegiate level. Many blacks applied to UH only to be refused entry, but no one took legal action. In 1957, repression of the NAACP by the state Attorney General's office had a chilling effect on the Houston branch and statewide, but this does not explain the branch's inability to organize a lawsuit before then. No doubt the presence of TSUN, renamed Texas Southern University (TSU) in 1951, and the support it had in the black community, had something to do with the tolerance of segregation at the city's other collegiate institutions. How could blacks demand their cake and eat it too? 26

The refusal to admit Caucasian students to a university created for Negroes (which said it existed for such a purpose in its very name) was challenged before the new state institution was fully a year old. In the summer of 1948, Jack Coffman became the first white student to apply to the TSU. The Board of Directors requested of Attorney General Price Daniel his formal advice. He issued Opinion No. V-645 on July 31, declaring that "since substantially equal courses of study are offered for white students at The University of Texas and other State colleges, a white student may not be legally admitted to the Texas State University for Negroes." The board, in turn, notified Coffman that he could not enter the blacks-only school. In January 1949, another white, Harold Schachter, attempted to enter the black university as part of a joint anti-segregation effort of the NAACP Youth Council and the Young Progressives of Texas. The board also refused his application, citing Daniel's opinion. 27

In the fall semester of 1955 white attempts to enter TSU again made headlines. TSU rejected six non-blacks: Warren Martin, an associate pastor of a Methodist church in Houston; Albert Kaszczynke, the seventeen year old son of a Polish war refugee recently moved to Houston from Chicago; Thomas C. Brunson Jr., a Baylor graduate and navy lieutenant on duty in the Pacific; John August Solomon Jr., a resident of Dallas; William A. McNear, a resident of Houston; and Alko Awata, a resident of Tokyo, Japan, who had applied for or inquired about admission. When their names became public, Kaszczynke, Brunson, and Solomon explained to the press that their applications had been misdirected. Kaszczynke stated he did not realize that TSU was only for blacks; Brunson intended to apply to UT for graduate work, and Solomon had intended to apply to UH. Martin, a native of Kerrville who previously had done work with a black church in Waco, inquired about admission to TSU saying he sought the educational opportunity in Houston that best matched what he could afford. The young preacher told the press that "all men are brothers" and that he supported the
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The applications from Caucasians and an Asian sparked reconsideration of TSU’s segregated admissions policy among board members. At their September 1955 meeting the executive committee recommended the immediate adoption of a racially nondiscriminatory admissions policy. George Allen, a black board member from Dallas, supported the recommendation, but Dr. H. D. Bruce, a white board member, moved to table further discussion of the matter until the board convened in closed session. Allen objected and called for the matter to be discussed openly before the press, but the other members overruled him.29

In closed session the board voted 5-1 to postpone a decision on desegregation until its next meeting. Mack Hannah, chairman of the board, explained that they had voted to delay final action in order to give TSU’s new president, Dr. Samuel M. Nabrit, time to settle into his position. On January 10, 1956, the board met and approved the desegregation of TSU by a vote of 6-1. W. R. Banks, President Emeritus of Prairie View, Hannah, Bruce, Price Crawley and J. O. Nobles of Midland, Dr. J. C. Chadwick, and Houston attorney Ralph Lee attended the meeting. Except for Lee’s dissenting vote, the board concurred with the executive committee’s recommendation that the U. S. Supreme Court required it to admit “all qualified applicants without regard to race, color or creed.” Lee protested that the board’s action might be illegal without a specific court order, but then moved that TSU desegregate its faculty and staff, saying “if [integration] were proper for the students it was proper for the faculty.” His motion carried unanimously.30

Despite TSU’s declaration of an open policy, for the next two years no whites entered the school. In the fall of 1956 several white students were admitted, but never registered. Nabrit gave them each “special counseling” by phone or in a letter, and none followed through on enrollment. What the president told the prospective students is not recorded, but his words along with the negative mood in Houston toward school desegregation apparently combined to keep whites out in 1956 and possibly in 1957 as well. TSU kept no record of the race or ethnicity of its student body as a matter of official policy.

If the massive resistance movement discouraged whites from entering TSU, it ironically provided the university with one of its first publicly acknowledged white students. On Monday, September 15, 1958, E. A. Munroe, a Baptist preacher and ardent segregationist, applied to TSU, accompanied by about twenty-five of his flock from the Missionary Baptist Temple. They were carrying the church banner, the U.S. flag, and pro-segregation placards with slogans like “Integration [sic] Leads to Intermarrige,” and “We Believe in a Government by the People Not By Nine Men.” Munroe arrived at TSU, registered for classes, and wrote a check for $83.50 for his tuition and fees. Wearing white high-heeled boots, a dark serge suit, “a broad-brimmed white Stetson hat and tie with fuchsia sequins and gold lame stitching,” Munroe cut a comical figure. He told newspaper reporters, who immediately swarmed the campus, that he entered the school to “show the stupidity of integration and our defiance of the Supreme Court verdict on integration.” He added, “my purpose is to serve as an object lesson to show how stupid and inconsistent it is for me to enroll in a colored university as a white man when we have so many fine white schools and universities.” Munroe exhibited a tongue-in-cheek demeanor about entering TSU. He indicated that he wanted a bachelor’s degree in religion and registered for classes in psychology, philosophy, and a survey of the Old Testament, but he also stated he “had no idea tuition would be so high . . . looks like I’ll have to sell my Fleetwood Cadillac to pay the tuition.”31

The board split on whether to admit Munroe. The minority, Lee and Hannah, held that he only applied for “propaganda purposes” and to embarrass the university and did not favor his admission. The majority of the board, however, accepted Nabrit’s advice that TSU had to enroll him regardless of his purposes for doing so. After a few days of classes Munroe dropped out and stopped payment on his check, saying that he encountered an “awful lot of prejudice and discrimination” from TSU’s black students, which he claimed proved that most blacks as well as whites did not want integration. Another white minster enrolled after Munroe without all the grandstanding, but with a desire to counter the Baptist preacher’s views. A Methodist pastor, Clayton McMahill, said he was taking a stand for “a world Christian brotherhood” in desegregating TSU.32

UH’s implementation of its long-planned desegregation occurred in the summer of 1962 when ten black students enrolled for graduate study. The university admitted “on a selective basis as part of a study” Charles P. Rhinehart, Jr., a faculty member in TSU’s Department of Music.33 Vice President Patrick J. Nicholson summarized the “situation” to a journalist:

The initial move this summer toward integration of the university was a part of a study began several years ago by the board. At that time it was decided that at the proper time, we would accept any Negro student into our graduate divisions who met the requirements of
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The “study” Nicholson spoke of had been initiated in 1959 under the presidency of Clanton Ware Williams. When UH launched its campaign to secure full state support, shortly after UH benefactor Hugh Roy Cullen died on July 4, 1957, university officials knew they would no longer be able to forestall admitting blacks. A. R. “Babe” Schwartz, a Jewish attorney and Democratic politician from the Galveston area who served in the Texas legislature, observed that racism was a key part of the mosaic against UH becoming a state-supported institution. State senators from rural areas in East and West Texas formed a powerful bloc and frequently rallied together against measures benefiting urban areas exclusively. UH’s becoming a state university, so these politicians felt, would primarily attract to it the “poor and minorities.”

Schwartz observed that their opposition was a key part of the attack on state funding for UH. Racist opponents represented state financing of UH as analogous to welfare. The Texas senate, nevertheless, approved the UH legislation styled Senate Bill 2 and, in July 1961, Governor Price Daniels signed it. UH became a state university beginning in the fall semester of 1963. During the transition period of 1961-1963, college officials decided to desegregate and avert the negative publicity a lawsuit would generate.\endnote{35}

In November 1962, Nicholson told a reporter from the student newspaper, The Cougar, “integration is a large, complex problem and we are moving along without an exact time schedule, but we have had it under study for three years.” UH regents took no action in the direction of integrating its living and dining facilities and maintained that they were studying the problem. Black undergraduates were admitted in the fall of 1963, and in 1965, UH President Philip Hoffman authorized the recruitment of blacks into university athletic programs. By the fall of 1967, UH led the field among formerly for-whites-only Texas universities in the number of blacks pursuing graduate or undergraduate degrees. It had approximately 95 black graduate students and 469 black undergraduates. By comparison, North Texas State University in Denton was the next highest with 69 and 453, then Lamar State College of Technology in Beaumont with 10 and 416, and East Texas State University in Commerce with 60 and 325.

The large flagship universities continued to do poorly in the recruitment and retention of black graduate and undergraduate students, with UT having only 31 and 188 and Texas A&M having only 30 and 40. Houston’s large, urban environment with a substantial black population no doubt helped UH attract black students. TSU, on the other hand, had about 20 whites enrolled as graduate students and 25 as undergraduates. UH’s 564 black students made up about 2.5% of a total student body of 21,770; while TSU’s 45 white students comprised a little more than 1% of its 4,422 students. It is interesting to note that UH and TSU represented the most culturally diverse and “integrated” of the state’s institutions of higher education.\endnote{36}

The reality that these statewide leaders of diversity and integration essentially were still dominated by racial discrimination remained a source of trouble and contest. The old civil rights vanguard such as the NAACP was no longer in the forefront of the continuing struggle for access and equity, democracy and social justice. Young, black racial militants like Lynn Busan, Deloyd Parker, Ester King, Charles Freeman, Lee Otis Johnson, Joseph and Sherra Locke, now waged many of the battles on and off the campuses. They intended to see to it that the black racial identity was lifted up and respected in the public arena, from the classrooms and boardrooms to the dorm rooms.

Rev. William Lawson, no racial militant but no accommodating “Sambo” either, became a key figure in keeping the pressure on the two universities to overthrow the racist, color-minded pasts that produced them in favor of a color-blind future. His church, Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, sits between the two campuses and served students and staff of both institutions. As pressure mounted at both campuses to establish a commitment to diversity, or “integration” as it was then termed, something known as the merger debate pushed its way into the public sphere.\endnote{37}

The merger debate characterizes a significant part of the most recent phase in the strange career of public higher education in Houston. One of the first instances of the merger issue came about after Rex G. Baker, a member of the Texas Commission on Higher Education (a precursor to the state Higher Education Coordinating Board), stated that the law schools at TSU and UH ought to be consolidated. Speaking at an inaugural luncheon for UH President Hoffman, Baker opined that “there is little or no justification for two state-supported law schools within a half mile of each other, since integration has been thrust upon us.”

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supported. Baker held that the presence of the two schools, so close together geographically (plus the existence of the private South Texas School of Law in downtown Houston), represented a duplication of programs. As one or the other institution was a waste of the taxpayers' dollars, one or the other should be "phased out." He noted that UH had about 280 students, while TSU had only about thirty, clearly implying that TSU's law school should be the one to get the axe. The strong support for TSU as a "special purpose" institution and the fear that such a merger would pressure UH into admitting more black students than it cared to, saved TSU's law school in 1962-63.  

A great hue and cry to "abolish" TSU arose again in 1967 in the aftermath of a campus melee in which five hundred students were arrested; Houston police officer Louis R. Kuba was fatally shot, and five TSU students were charged with his murder. Mayor Louie Welch stood by his police chief Herman Short, whose racism and support for officers who brutalized and harassed blacks with impunity had earned him the reputation for being Houston's answer to Birmingham's "Bull" Connor, but he also argued that TSU should not be abolished. He said,

I have enough confidence in the school and enough knowledge of its operations to feel certain it must be maintained. It should not be abolished or done away with... TSU has a strong and vital place in our community and with proper administration it will continue to fulfill its proper role.

The proper role of TSU continued into the 1970s to be a major problem for state legislators and officials in charge of the state's higher educational system. White supremacy and UH's larger size combined to place the burden of justifying its existence on the shoulders of TSU. With election of blacks such as Mickey Leland of Houston and Wilhelmina Delco of Austin to the state legislature, however, TSU would find very influential allies. Whenever the subject of merging TSU with UH was broached, these allies effectively silenced all talk by noting that as TSU became a state-supported institution more than 15 years before UH, and given merger experiences in Tennessee and elsewhere, TSU should have priority in any merger process. Not wishing to see UH subsumed within the name, tradition, or tenured professorate of TSU, merger advocates backed off the issue. Current problems of financial mismanagement at TSU involving an indebtedness of $13.6 million and the inability to meet its payroll without outside intervention has again brought up discussion of closing or merging it, or placing it into conservatorship. Rumors ran rife and a press conference/mass rally was called on the campus to protest the receivership proposal. A state legislator, well known as a compromiser and the furthest thing from a black nationalist of any sort, found it expedient to burst into fiery rhetoric stating that "over my dead body will TSU go into conservatorship." The strange career has gotten stranger yet when liberal integrationist politicians become the bullwork saving TSU.

In less hyperbolic and media-driven discussions the fate of TSU is being worked out. The confused atmosphere generated by the attorney general's opinion of the Hopwood decision, which outlaws consideration of race and ethnicity in admissions and financial aid programs, is one factor affecting that fate. Whether UH, its parent campus between 1927 and 1947, will ever be merged with TSU is where prophecy begins and history ends.

The peculiar social construction of race and its salience to both TSU and UH reveal much about the complex of cultures and identity group politics that drive Houston. It tells us much about the persistence of white supremacy and the various ideological and practical ways blacks have responded to institutionalized racism, but it does not tell us the right thing to do as a new century and millennium approach. Little in the behavior of the white majority over the past seventy years has given blacks reason to trust that they would fare better if TSU and UH merged. On the other hand, the question of the naive student who asks why, if society has overcome the racism of yesterday, does the state support one predominately black and one predominately white university in Houston (divided only by Emmett Jay Scott Street), still begs for an answer. History offers but a partial answer by questioning the assumption that the citizens of this city, state, and nation, have overcome racism. Jim Crow and Joe Cracker live, and they still demand their separate universities, albeit not the exclusively black and white ones of bygone days.

I am grateful to the Texas State Historical Association for the opportunity to present this paper at its 1993 meeting. Charles Martin's session, "From Segregation to Integration in Texas Higher Education," provided me with insightful criticisms from William Harris (then president of Texas Southern University), Cary Wintz, and Light Cummins. Big thanks also to Joseph Pratt and the members of his seminar "Desegregation of the South" for their criticism of an earlier draft of this paper, as well as the Nia Doria Benci Seminar. Much respect also to Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., Linda Reed, Dashiell Geyen, Winona St. Julian, Demetria and L'il Al Shabazz, for their help and encouragement in this research.
supported. Baker held that the presence of the two schools, so close together geographically (plus the existence of the private South Texas School of Law in downtown Houston), represented a duplication of programs. As one or the other institution was a waste of the taxpayers’ dollars, one or the other should be “phased out.” He noted that UH had about 280 students, while TSU had only about thirty, clearly implying that TSU’s law school should be the one to get the axe. The strong support for TSU as a “special purpose” institution and the fear that such a merger would pressure UH into admitting more black students than it cared to, saved TSU’s law school in 1962-63.38

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NOTES

1. See George Ruble Woolfolk, The Free Negro in Texas, 1800-1860: 'A Study in Cultural Compromise (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), for an intriguing discussion of the cultural kampfs (struggles or war) that took place to set the social origins of the state.  


7. Thomas, Negroes in Houston, 62.


31. "Segregationists Win Right to T.S.U.," *Houston Chronicle*, September 15, 1958 (includes photographs); "White Pastor Finds Another on T.S.U. Rolls," *Houston Chronicle*, September 18, 1958 (includes photographs), and "Preacher Vows Court Fight as Entry at TSU Challenged," *Houston Post*, September 18, 1958. In the first of these articles TSU Registrar E. O. Bell said that several white students had enrolled the previous year, but refused to state how many, whether any remained, or to identify them to the press.

32. First quote is in "Rev. Munroe Enrolls at TSU: Tactics Hit by Board Member," *Houston Informer*, September 20, 1958; second quote is in "Object Lesson," *Southern School News*, October 15, 1958, 14; and the third in "White Reporter His Experiences Will Help," *Houston Chronicle*, September 18, 1958. Clayton McMullin pastored St. Thomas Methodist Church for only a couple of months, and his action led one of the church's board members to say of his enrollment at TSU,"This is a shock. I don't approve of it myself." My thanks toBernard McBeth of Houston, past chair of the Archives and History Committee of the United Methodist Center (Texas Annual Conference), for helping me try to find out more about McMullin.

Wesley said nothing about McMullin's, but wrote about Munroe in his editorial, "Anarchy Vi The Rule of Law," *Houston Informer*, September 20, 1958, that "when a Baptist preacher places naiacards in the hands of school children, attempting and defying the Constitution of the United States, as interpreted by the Supreme Court; and leads those children in a public demonstration against the law, we are witnessing one of the worst forms of an evil plea for anarchy."

After the initial news sensation, the issue of whites at TSU faded from public view. In small numbers they entered the school, especially its schools of pharmacy and law. As for faculty desegregation, TSU hired whites with unparalleled vigor. Five years after the board voted to drop the color line, whites made up fifteen percent of TSU's faculty; see "In the Colleges," *Southern School News*, April 1962, 17. No traditionally white university hired anywhere near that proportion of blacks as faculty then or since.


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