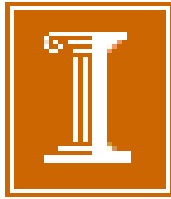


**ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT ON THE JUBILEE
COMMEMORATION OF THE *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*
SUPREME COURT DECISION, University of Illinois**



Prepared for the
Jubilee Commemoration Organizing Committee

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3.0 Beyond the University as Usual

This chapter details how the *Brown* Commemoration attempted to challenge what we call “business as usual” at the university. As it defied the norms of the university’s discourse on diversity and race, the commemoration also challenged the received practices and discourses of the university—its larger “register.” We consider how both the message (what is said) as well as the medium (the frames in which messages are articulated) matter, and we note the potential for change in universities at those moments when something about the “university as usual” has been challenged, when people step outside of their prescribed roles as students, knowledge-holders, lecturers, or audiences into unexpected territory. We suggest that for a productive dialogue on diversity and race to emerge, the university must—at least intermittently and in some spaces—feel different: it must become the home for an unruly, sometimes emotional and contentious, family.

Rather than providing an exhaustive definition of the normative university register, we call attention to instances when people recognized that “business as usual” had in some way been violated. To oversimplify slightly, the normative university register on race we take up here is two-fold: first, in its academic mode, it asserts that knowledge is objective, established and shared, and therefore, not usually controversial; second, it celebrates a comfortable diversity which, we argue, can sometimes take on the look of color-blindness (i.e., the idea that race no longer matters). We consider these two default positions in this chapter’s two sections, “The Grammar of Race” and “Bringing it Home.” We name these to examine the *Brown* year’s most provocative and challenging moments when the realities of race relations were laid bare; we describe instances when “the grammar of race” was revealed in unsettling ways, and when speakers attempted to “bring things home” to their audiences. Featured in this chapter is the public face of the *Brown* year: the events themselves. Although we want to understand the potentially transformative dialogues that took place away from formal *Brown* events, we are also committed to fine-grained analysis of moments during formal events that revealed the routines of daily life at the university. While we subject these operations to critique, we also recognize our own implication in them: we participate in similar operations daily as faculty members and students, and some of our activities during and after the *Brown* year embody university “business as usual,” and rely on well-entrenched registers of university discourse, as well. Using ethnographic detail to record the talk and feeling of *Brown* events, we aim to set the scene in sufficient detail that our readers can intervene in our analysis, perhaps to extend or question our own meaning-making. We thus invite our readers to place themselves here, as we grapple with what can make a difference in the attempt to foster a campus and society-wide discussion of race and diversity.

At issue throughout this report is “what works.” We do not, for example, assert that all challenges to the university’s business as usual are productive. In fact, we leave open the possibility that some disruptions of the university register may, in fact, stop dialogue, rather than facilitate new ways to talk about diversity and race. All the same, we observe that those instances violating “business as usual” at the university were usually the very times when engagement peaked.

3.1 The Grammar of Race

In this section, we consider moments in the *Brown* events that exposed, challenged, or disrupted the logic of race in order to comment in various ways on the conventional use of race in speech at the American university. We call the four strategies people used in response to the perceived status quo on race relations reversing, ridiculing, resisting, and emptying. By “reversing” race, we mean those moments in which people substituted one racial group for another in order to expose the complexities and violence behind the discourse of race and its effects. “Ridiculing” race describes moments where race was taken to its extreme as a way to reveal the absurdities of its logic and meanings in U.S. society. We call those moments when participants denied stereotypes instances of “resisting” race. Whereas denying a stereotype depends on active contradiction, “emptying” race names the strategy of questioning whether race is the issue most pertinent to the discussion at hand. Taken together, these strategies expose a grammar of race, which we define as the patterns and unarticulated rules underlying the practices that represent race in the contemporary American university.

3.1.1 Reversing Race

“Conversations in Black and *Brown*,” a November event organized by Cynthia Oliver, an assistant professor of dance, presented a five-person panel discussion on race and dance in the United States. One of the panel members, Dianne McIntyre, was in residence as a visiting choreographer to guide a group of students in a dance performance in response to the legacy of the *Brown* decision. She described her good fortune in having attended an integrated school with a diverse faculty and student body while many of her contemporaries were bused to white schools where “they were isolated, eating lunch, playing at recess and going to the bathroom at different times than the white students.” McIntyre began her dance career in an integrated after-school dance group, where she came to think of modern dance as black dance. The audience burst into laughter when she described thinking in college “that it was nice that all these white people wanted to learn a black form of dancing.” Later, when the floor was opened to questions and comments, the conversation turned to the ways in which some art forms are associated with particular races. At issue was the larger question of artistic ownership: does art “belong” to one or another racial group, and who in turn is “allowed” to participate in what art forms? Laughter erupted again when McIntyre related how she replied to an invitation to join “Dance Black America”: “Only when there is a ‘Dance White America.’”

With her reference to “Dance White America” and to modern dance as “black dance,” McIntyre surprised her audience by reversing conventional racial associations. In order to think about how McIntyre exposed prevailing racial logic, we need to recall the audience response: resounding laughter. What made these moments humorous was the unexpected substitution of white for black, and black for white. During McIntyre’s frank recollection of her early college encounter with whites learning modern dance, audience response was heightened by her admission that she had no idea that her understanding of modern dance as “black” ran against the grain of common associations and beliefs about race in America. When McIntyre disclosed the terms she used to refuse the offer to join

“Dance Black America,” the audience laughed with her because, in the logic of race in America, things “white” go unnamed. Further, as Teresa suggested in an edit to this chapter, the audience is jarred because they think, “That’ll never happen; there will probably never be a ‘Dance White America.’” “By reversing white and black, McIntyre challenged the audience to register the racial grammar of our times in which the majority remains racially unmarked. As they laughed, members of the audience were led to encounter this unspoken racial logic and to register what makes “Dance White America” funny or jarring.

In an October meeting with white film director Frederick Marx, the logic of race was similarly spotlighted by an audience remark. Marx joined students at the Allen Hall Unit One Living and Learning Community for “*Hoop Dreams* Hoopla,” a discussion of his 1994 award-winning documentary, *Hoop Dreams*, which follows two African American high school students in Chicago who aspire to play professional basketball. During the discussion session that followed a public screening of the film the day before, a thirty-something African American woman who introduced herself as being from the community commented that she thought it would be interesting to see how an African American would do a documentary on a white family. In response, Marx turned the hypothetical to his own family, imagining them as the object of such a documentary, and remarked that he “would never let anyone do a documentary on him, except maybe Arthur Agee and William Gates,” the two boys featured in his own film. This question forced Marx to reveal his own racial logic, and to reflect on his own unquestioned willingness to make a documentary about two African American boys while admitting that he would never submit himself, a white man in a position of relative privilege, to the scrutiny of the camera’s eye. Of course, the decision to be the subject of a documentary is more than a racial matter, but there was no question that race was in the room during this conversation.

Earlier in the evening, Teresa had challenged Marx about his decision to donate some of the film’s proceeds to the boys. Marx told her that he would have liked to have given the boys full ownership rights to the film, but NCAA regulations prevented them from benefiting financially from any activity related to playing basketball. Teresa then asked Marx whether he would have felt as passionately about making sure a white middle-class family benefited from the success of a movie that featured them. Marx answered “yes,” but noted that “the money might have meant more to a poor family.” In an aside in her fieldnotes, Teresa questioned whether any speaker would have been comfortable answering any way other than “yes” to such a query: “The question I asked him next was of a sensitive nature and I am not sure I could have received an honest answer no matter whom I asked.” To answer “no,” Teresa reflected, would have been to admit participation in a racial logic that imagines African Americans as the recipients of white charity. In Teresa’s view, Marx’s affirmative reply, to the extent that it implies the claim that race did not matter in the compensation of documentary subjects, becomes complicated as he asserts the significance of economic class by saying the money would mean more to a poor family. Such an assertion may be substituting class for race rather than acknowledging the connections between them. In her comments, Teresa ruminated on this reversal, noting that race likely did matter in Marx’s calculations, just as it probably had in his answer to the question about whether he would consent to being the subject of a documentary. As a group, however, we were unable to find stable answers to

questions about the motivations for making “Hoop Dreams,” its choice of subjects, and its calculus of imagined compensations. Mark, for example, was inclined to take Marx’s reply to Teresa at face value, and called attention to Teresa’s skepticism as a potential site for analysis. Rather than referee the merit of these and other claims that arose in our discussions, we prefer to underscore the difficulties inherent in discussions of race, and the potential for pitfalls in relying on the strategy of reversing race.

At an event hosted by the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES), Blannie Bowen, an African American professor of agricultural education from Pennsylvania State University, insisted that race did matter as he challenged students and faculty to think about what it would be like if whites were a racial minority. Bowen focused his comments on the unique challenges of diversifying colleges of agriculture, which often remain bastions of whiteness in the university. In answer to a query about how to remedy the “chilly climate” for students and faculty of color at the University of Illinois, Bowen asked his audience to expose themselves to cultural differences. Without a trace of irony, he invited them to “have fun,” and then asked them to stretch their imaginations: “Imagine going into a situation where you are the only white person. . . . How often are whites in situations where they are the minority? What would be the effect if this happened more often? What would have happened if, after the *Brown* decision, a few whites went to all black schools? Would they have lost out on their identity, would they feel uncomfortable, face discrimination, etc?” With these hypothetical reversals, Bowen challenged audience members, most of whom were white, to consider how a white minority would respond to a potentially indifferent or even hostile environment if the tables were turned, and thereby called on them to think more aggressively about how to redress the university’s racial status quo.

In the above instances, challenges to the racial status quo were mobilized in “black” and “white.” Less frequently, other noteworthy *Brown* moments disrupted this racial binary with other substitutions. For example, at another Allen Hall event, Ben Cox, an original black Freedom Rider and preacher, addressed over twenty people in a room that Teresa described as “a classroom with very comfortable desks, carpeted floors, and cubically stacked carpeted boxes for students to sit on.” Teresa characterized the tone of the event this way: “The room quiets down as the staff member introduces Ben Cox. It is now quiet to the point that I can hear the hum of the electricity going through the room. The person who introduced Cox notes that he was active in the civil rights movement, was jailed 17 times and spent some time in solitary confinement. Everyone is listening, stern-faced, quiet. An African American girl is taking notes, as is the Latino sitting next to her.” Thus we see that Cox’s authority as a historical figure, activist, and preacher was quickly established, and that the student attendants were eager to listen: this authority, as well as a measure of urgency, had also been established by the event’s plain-speaking title: “The Unfinished Business of Civil Rights: What Can We Do?”

Only moments later, however, Cox established an informal rapport with the students, and soon the audience was laughing. Teresa recorded, “I cannot help but smile when his eyes focus on mine. He is one of those people who could smile saying anything. He is a very happy man, even when he said, ‘and a white man spit in my eye, and all my anger, upbringing, non-violent learning swelled up in me.’ He is a preacher, a very charming man. He blinks, though, as if blinking back the pain that the telling of his memories invokes. He is not giving a speech. He is just speaking.” Over the course of the *Brown*

year, some events distinguished themselves from others by refusing to conform to conventional academic formats and registers—a point we address at more length in the following chapter. By remarking that Cox was “just speaking” instead of “giving a speech,” Teresa had registered the unusually comfortable, informal, and conversational tone of the event, as well as its impact.

This informal register, however, in no way stopped Cox from tackling the hard issues, foremost the right of all people to fight discrimination. As he put it, “If someone discriminates, you ought to holler as loud as you can. . . . The real crime is to be discriminated against and to walk away silently.” Students laughed moments later when Cox brought this home with an example of race reversal in which whites charged him with discrimination: “I taught some white kids and failed them. They said I did it ‘cause I was black.” Teresa noticed that “the African American woman/student sitting in front of me chuckled, lowering and shaking her head,” and speculated that “I think she probably was laughing because it is the typical ‘reverse racism’ response, and I think she was shocked because this response can be interpreted as an insult to Cox’s morals. That white students are so ignorant as to think that they are equally discriminated against by blacks.” Sidestepping the obvious question—whether or not the white students were justified in their complaints—Cox was instead highlighting their right as whites to level the charge of discrimination, their right to holler. When a student called on Cox to clarify his comment, he shifted gears and responded, “If a gay or lesbian were being discriminated against, I would walk a picket line with them even though I don’t believe their beliefs.” By telling the anecdote of the white students in his class, Cox was reversing race as McIntyre, Bowen, and Marx had done. As he addressed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, Cox extended his defense of the right to holler against discrimination, even if it is whites who think they are being discriminated against. By explicitly stating his support for the gay and lesbian movement (in spite of his personal objection to their “beliefs”), Cox challenged a conventional racial grammar in which blacks occupy a privileged position as those discriminated against, although the problem of discrimination against whites was far from heading his concerns. When an Allen Hall resident advisor followed with a question about discrimination against women, Cox answered, “When I see women out jogging with a dog, I see injustice.” Understanding a woman who jogs with a dog out of fear as an object of discrimination, Cox again extended the struggle of discrimination beyond race.

3.1.2 Ridiculing Race

If moments of racial reversal exposed the grammar of race, racial ridicule called explicit attention to the absurdity of that grammar. For example, in the event we just described, Cox ridiculed racial logic as a way to warm up his audience. Teresa described these early moments of his conversation this way: “Very sporadic, sometimes it flows from one thought to the next, sometimes he pauses for 5 to 15 seconds before he starts up a new topic, which is different from the previous but related to civil rights. . . . He asks a question and looks directly at a student, ‘If you were dying would it matter whose blood you had?’ . . . If I was dying, I’d say, ‘Give me blood, give me blood!’ There is more laughing; it is a quiet laughter, a hearty yet low laughter.” The hearty laughter acknowledged the absurdity of racial discrimination on one’s deathbed.

While Cox exposed the absurdity of racial discrimination by posing a hypothetical question, Paul Finkelman, Chapman Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of

Tulsa College Of Law, did the same work by reciting historical facts. Finkelman, who is white, offered a seemingly unending list of the grotesque laws and practices comprising the legacy of the American Jim Crow era. Nicole and Rene both recognized Finkelman's strategy of letting the list speak for itself, thus letting the absurdity emerge with little commentary. Rene noted that people in the audience were "shaking their heads at the injustices." The inanity of the "facts," though, did not stop Finkelman from reaching, as Cox did, into the realm of hypothetical absurdities, as when, in mentioning the segregation of libraries, he spoke of people's fears that books for blacks and whites "may have dated over the summer." At this the crowd burst into laughter.

Finkelman used the absurd sporadically and strategically as he sketched the differences between the United States fifty years ago and today, between a segregated and a desegregated society. After the comment about "books dating," Finkelman mentioned segregation at schools for the blind, where "there were separate campuses, perhaps created in fear that a black student might stumble into a white student or vice versa, posing a threat to the entire system." Again, the audience laughed. Later, after pointing out that taxes, too, were segregated, he asked, "Who knows what would have happened if the names were together in the same book?" Finkelman cited the many rigid boundaries so prevalent in segregated society in order to ridicule them. By seeing these once-common boundaries through a present-day lens, he pointed out the absurdity of widespread attitudes about race and seemed to be asking, "What were people so afraid of?"

Other speakers exposed the absurdity of the grammar of race by transporting its logic to non-racial situations. This was precisely what Christopher Edley did in his comments on the logic supporting popular opposition to affirmative action. Edley wanted to underscore the absurdity of the claim made by some whites that affirmative action denies them opportunity. To show that this position "just does not correspond to reality," he offered the following hypothetical: "It is like going to the mall on a Saturday afternoon. You drive and drive around the parking lot, when you see the handicapped space, you think that if only it wasn't a handicapped spot you could have it. However, the spot would have been taken already if it was not set aside for someone else." This parable typifies the rhetorical strategy of displacement: race was not reversed, but instead replaced by another domain, as a means of ridiculing an underlying rationale. Speakers used such transpositions of the grammar of race in the hopes of helping their listeners grasp the absurdities of racial (il)logics.

3.1.3 Resisting Race

While both reversing race and ridiculing race refer to moments when the speakers called attention to race, resisting race describes a common and more directly confrontational reaction to the discourse of race and racial beliefs. When resisting race, people often challenged stereotypes or commonly conceived beliefs about racial groups by mobilizing contradictory examples. For example, in a previously described event, Blannie Bowen followed up his reversals, which asked audience members to imagine whites as minorities, by naming instances in which he had seen diversity work effectively. Following a discussion of his successfully integrated church, he described how all of the students in the college of agriculture at Penn State like country music, "even the two African Americans." Rene's fieldnotes record that he asked those students, "'Hey, why do you like country music? Are you guys still brothers?'" One of them

responded that a country singer lives near them and allows their family to use his land so they learned to like it.” Bowen’s example, which resists the common assumption that African Americans do not like country music, suggests that race in isolation does not determine tastes, and reminds us that racial groups do not own specific cultural forms or products. At the same time, we note—in an aside we lack the room to develop—that this story of black affinity for a “white” musical form was tied to property relations, and that Bowen did not address this linkage.

This instance of resisting race had a powerful impact because it reproduced the lived experience of the speaker, rather than posing theoretical or hypothetical questions about race. It was Bowen, after all, who questioned whether or not the “guys” were “still brothers” when he found out that they liked country music. By exposing his own racial assumptions about musical taste, he seemed to be demonstrating both the persistence of stereotypes and the ease with which they can be unraveled. Certainly, the two “brothers” remain African American even as or if they like country music. Bowen followed up this example by telling his audience to “change and expand your horizons.” People must resist racial assumptions, he seemed to argue, by extending their field of vision.

Reacting to the power of this kind of overt resistance, Rene wrote in her fieldnotes about her own experience as “the only white person in the room.” Her notes echo Bowen’s emphasis on the need to actively change our perceptions: “I have experienced being the only white person in the room,” she wrote, “because I make the effort and put myself out there. Others are afraid or don’t want to jar their perceptions.” The deliberate attempt to resist race by challenging common perceptions was a crucial element of what Bowen asked his audience to do, and Rene concluded that this effort was one of the keys to racial understanding. To this end, Bowen suggested the possibility of a cultural training program, similar to a study abroad program, but located instead in communities like Chicago’s South Side or East St. Louis, where people would have the opportunity to confront and resist race-based assumptions. In her fieldnotes, Rene applied Bowen’s charge to a local problem as she wondered if universities could create those spaces on campus through specific attention to cultural issues during their orientation sessions for new students. “Perhaps,” she speculated, “there should be programs during orientation that deal more with interacting, learning about, and truly experiencing ‘active integration’ on this campus while people have the chance if they are willing to step out of their comfort zones.”

Racial assumptions about culture drove other examples of people resisting race. Melba Beals, one of the Little Rock Nine and author of *Warriors Don’t Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock Central High School*, came to the U of I in March to give a public lecture in the ballroom of the student union, one of the largest venues on campus. Rene, who attended the event, observed that this was one of the more prominent and well attended *Brown* Commemoration events of the year: “The room was packed with people from the community, professors and students alike. I noticed many Asians, Latinos, and African Americans. I recognized many people from previous *Brown* events.” During the question and answer session, she recorded that a middle-aged white woman asked Beals, “How can I motivate students who do not want to learn? They waste their talent memorizing rap songs.” Beals answered that she should “meet them where they are at, make rap songs out of the lesson.” We find this moment telling: while the audience member explicitly linked rap music to wasted talent and a lack of desire for

learning, and assumed that Beals and the rest of the audience would agree that African Americans who listen to rap music could only be wasting their time, Beals' forceful response challenged the questioner's racial grammar by converting the stereotype into an asset. Echoing a central tenet in the work of John Dewey, the famous philosopher of education, Beals instead pointed to the need to "meet people where they are at"—which means, in this context, working within the familiar constructs of student knowledge as a first step. Her response also suggests that negative assumptions about rap music keep it from becoming a productive educational tool. As she resisted assumptions about rap music, a musical genre widely associated with African Americans (even though white adolescents constitute a large portion of the genre's fans), she also resisted assumptions about race. She effectively used this strategy to challenge stereotypes about African American culture, but resisting race was not her only strategy. In the next section, we discuss how Beals and others sometimes did something similar to—yet ultimately different from—resisting race, by taking race entirely out of the picture.

3.1.4 Emptying Race

Perhaps the greatest challenge to any discussion of race is the one that asks whether "race" is in the room at all—or whether other factors (e.g., gender, class, etc.) might better explain the matter at hand. With "emptying," we call attention to precisely those moments when people "emptied" a situation of race and its workings. Against the landscape of a year devoted to consideration of race in our place and time, challenges to the pertinence of race could hardly go unnoticed. We attend to these moments because we think they reveal an often unspoken and uncomfortable question: Did "race" produce a particular effect or formation we observed on campus? We mark this question as "unspoken" and "uncomfortable" because conversations about race inevitably ground to a halt whenever it was raised.

We turn now to telling moments at the heart of the *Brown* Commemoration: the campus visits of the Brown sisters and Melba Beals. Unquestionable is the Brown sisters' symbolic importance to the observance of the *Brown* decision's 50th anniversary. Their story, like Beals', is at once a private experience and a part of the nation's public history. In this context, seemingly lighthearted jabs at the relevance of race were provocative. In what follows, we by no means suggest that any of these women denied race. It speaks for itself that the *Brown* sisters and Beals traveled the country throughout the jubilee year—and for years before—in the name of a court decision that sought racial justice. But we are intrigued that occasionally they made comments that effectively emptied race from the conversation. Cheryl Brown Henderson did this when she explained why the decision bears her father's surname, Brown. She explained that Oliver Brown's name led the list because he was the only man among the plaintiffs; she further diminished her father's role by disclosing that he had not been a civil rights activist, and instead merely consented to the NAACP's request that he participate in the lawsuit against the Topeka Board of Education. Then Henderson jibed, "Today we would call it sexism," and the crowd erupted in laughter. She went on, "Apparently in that time men were all that and a bag of chips," and the laughter continued.

Remarks from Melba Beals combined the lighthearted emptying accomplished by Cheryl Brown Henderson with a reminder that, in her view, the *Brown* decision was not about race or racial integration, but rather about "access to opportunity." As she put it, "The word integration needs to be tossed out of the window and replaced with access to

opportunity.” She went on with revealing elaborations equating “integration” with “hate”: “I don’t hate anybody. I was adopted by a white family who did a lot for me.” Almost at once, however, she asserted the efficacy of the *Brown* decision and explicitly returned race to the table: “My mother was a maid in a white lady’s kitchen and made one dollar a day. *Brown* was the key to my escape.” She then continued with a defensive comment that spoke to the most prevalent critique of the efficacy of the *Brown* decision. After recognizing unchanged racial circumstances—in the U.S. broadly, and in education particularly—she remarked, “For all those that whine about *Brown*, it worked well for me.” With this comment she seemed to step back from social circumstances emergent after *Brown* so as to imagine only its consequences for individuals: the decision “worked well for me.” Even in brief commentaries like this one, race can be emptied from the conversation and replaced with personalized constructs that do not reference a social context. While personalizing racially influenced interactions offers uncommonly intimate moments to an audience during an academic talk, we are forced to wonder whether such intimacy forfeits connection of deeply personal experience to racism’s deep-seated structure.

As we return to an event described above, during which Blannie Bowen assessed the prerequisites for making agricultural colleges more racially diverse, we find that emptying often enables speakers to generalize racial issues to the broader society. The premise of his talk and of the discussion that followed was that colleges of agriculture typically lag behind other colleges, and thus require special attention. Among the explanations offered for this exceptional status was one that rang loudly in our ethnographers’ ears: the centrality of slavery to any plausible history of American agriculture. With Bowen’s mention of slavery still echoing in the ACES lecture hall, the conversation turned to the cultural and academic environment that even today causes African Americans to keep their distance from the agricultural studies that arguably remain central to any land grant university’s public mission. It was at this point that a white faculty member asked, “What can we do about the chilly climate? There are 40,000 people here. People don’t wave to everyone. What can we do?” This remark effectively emptied race from the conversation about campus climate, attributing the chill to the vast size of the institution. Without missing a beat, Bowen began his reply with a humorous reference to his own Southern upbringing: “I realize that it is a different environment than North Carolina, where people actually speak to each other.” In effect, he was saying, “I know you Midwesterners are generally cold and unfriendly, but that’s no excuse”—a suitable point of departure for restoring race to the conversation. Indeed, he implored his audience to “take the initiative to speak to others” as a first, modest step toward thawing race relations. To underscore the importance of friendly greetings, he then returned race directly to the discussion—as described above—by presenting the scenario of racial reversal in which white audience members became the campus minority.

There was another quite distinctive and, perhaps ironically, racially powerful way in which some African American speakers emptied *Brown* itself of race: by reminding listeners that for African Americans, *Brown* meant equal opportunity rather than racial integration. As Juan Williams, National Public Radio Senior Correspondent, put it, “It was never about sitting next to whites in a classroom; it was about access to resources and a quality of education.” Such a claim may seem, at first encounter, to echo Beals’ statement that “it worked well for me,” but Williams was neither promoting individual

experience over structural conditions nor sacrificing attention to the structure of racism. Instead, he was suggesting that within that structure the prize on which African Americans had fixed their sight was access and opportunity rather than integration itself—which served only as a means to the larger goal.

All of the examples cited above are complex: emptying race from a conversation almost always entails some of the other rhetorical strategies named earlier in this chapter. Because this complexity can amplify its impact, emptying race is the most risky, and potentially the most pernicious, rhetorical challenge to the grammar of race. As an example, we close this section with one speaker's attempt to make this very point. In January, Christopher Edley Jr., founding co-director of the Harvard Civil Rights Project, spoke on affirmative action. While laying the groundwork for his argument, he told a story that characterized the vast divide between whites' and blacks' perceptions of social reality: "In Goose Creek, South Carolina, there was a police raid early before school in a good regional high school that is one-third African American. The surveillance cameras show guns pointed at African American students. It was timed after the black buses arrived and before the whites came. This is an outrage. No drugs or contraband were found. They should be sent to Baghdad. [The crowd laughs.] In general, the white community thought that it was justified. . . . Blacks recognized it as racial profiling. Whites reply: racial paranoia. Blacks: You just don't get it." Edley's dramatic and extreme story is ambiguous, and remains somewhat opaque. Was he claiming that the Goose Creek police should be sent to Iraq so that they could join troops already engaged in racially targeted violence? Or was he thinking that the police would fit right in with troops similarly unable to locate critical contraband? In any event, it was from this extreme position that Edley introduced the notion that Goose Creek's white residents were in denial about the raid's racial motivation, so much so that, for suggesting otherwise, they eagerly charged their black neighbors with "racial paranoia." By concluding his account with black residents' reply that whites "just don't get it," Edley invited his audience to contemplate how the grammar of race can be deployed to put racial reconciliation far out of reach.

As this section has shown, we discerned, in the course of the year's events, four strategies—reversing, ridiculing, resisting, and emptying—that effectively disrupted perceived beliefs about race relations. These responses to a pervasive racial grammar have the capacity both to upset and to reinforce expected beliefs about race relations—and to provide occasions for pointed commentary on the shifts in attitude that must occur if dialogues on race are to produce positive social change. Nicole nicely documented the potential for such commentary in her fieldnotes on a rehearsal for the dance performance choreographed by Dianne McIntyre. Nicole described dancers as they came together in a circle to say, derisively, "It's a multicultural party line." Reflecting on the moment, Nicole wrote, "I believe the dancers are mocking the way in which diversity was 'marketed' to them, particularly within their high schools. Specifically, I'm reminded of various Ethnography of the University class discussions on the difference between diversity existing within a group and a group actually experiencing that diversity through meaningful interactions with people from diverse backgrounds." By incorporating a chorus of the "multicultural party line" into their routine, the dancers advanced the argument that the customary singular solution of multiculturalism cannot solve the complex issues surrounding diversity. They challenged a common assumption with one

five-word sentence uttered in a “mocking tone”; in some ways, their message was more powerful than the volumes of text that attempt to say the same thing. At the same time, their insertion of language into a physical performance highlights the fact that the four strategies we have discussed all rely on verbal play with concepts of race. In the next section, we explore a strategy that relied not on rhetorical interventions, but on challenges to definitions of the university as the alma mater and home of its members.

3.2 Bringing It Home

Throughout the *Brown* Commemoration year, speakers and audiences at numerous events sought to “bring it home” by locating issues of diversity and race in or at the university, in the cities of Champaign and Urbana, in Chicago and the Chicago suburbs from which many undergraduates hail, or within the state of Illinois. When this happened, bringing it home almost always constituted a disruptive act; it countered conventional university discourse insofar as it violated the expectation that discourse at the university is properly objective, rational, and distanced from its subject. While we recognize a growing desire to connect university research and teaching to life in the “real world” inside and outside campus boundaries, we also observe that this connection remains far from the norm. As community activist Imani Bazzell astutely observed in her interview with Teresa: “The academy sort of serves the academy. . . . Scholars are under the impression that talking to scholars is the best way to help people, when in actuality, being in touch with the on-the-ground reality is truly helpful.” When participants in the commemoration grounded abstract racial issues in concrete local experience, they pushed others to confront the issues at hand. The move to bring things home often aimed to generate a sense of ownership, to say in effect, “These are your issues, this is your reality.” In so doing, *Brown* Commemoration presenters charged audiences to grapple with problems of race in their own everyday lives. We note that bringing things home often produced a double effect: it gave people “at home” (students, faculty, staff, and Champaign-Urbana community members) a measure of legitimacy, but it also assigned them responsibility as racial actors and producers of racial ideologies. In this section, we ask how various attempts to bring racial issues home worked, what they achieved, and what they can tell us about how the university understands itself.

In a literal sense, home is where we live most intimately; it can be the place where we close off the wider world to enjoy a locus of control not ours once we step out the front door; it can be a place of safety and comfort, and of relative privacy; it can inspire loyalty, strong while we are close by and stronger still as time and distance intervene. But home can also be a place of confinement and isolation: it can be unsafe, a space where the cherished (and legal) expectation of privacy is violated. “Home” is a remarkably elastic word: it maps onto the many places and spaces to which we feel—or are encouraged to feel, or would like to feel—safe and comfortable and attached. The “university,” almost equally elastic in its connotations, thus has a peculiar relationship to home. It wants to be a home-like place toward which individuals express loyalty, but its academic function rejects the cultivation of safety and comfort, for these are thought to be inimical to the agonistic striving that makes for intellectual excellence. Business as usual in the university thus gives no quarter to the emotional intimacy we prize in our “real” homes, and emotional discourse often causes trouble when it emerges onstage

during university activities. And not just because such discourse imperils, or is believed to imperil, rational thought: it is also the case that reminiscing and testimony, the emotional staples of home life, threaten to expose inconvenient, unpleasant truths about the institution. Consequently, whenever *Brown* Commemoration events or speakers or audience members successfully framed the university as home, it became possible to exploit the porous conceptual boundary between these two terms, usually with the effect of mounting a powerful critique of business as usual.

In what follows, we take up exemplary cases of “bringing it home.” “A Homecoming for Affirmative Action” explores the qualities of successful moves to make the *Brown* Commemoration local. The focal point of this subsection is the Project 500 Anniversary, which was received with uncommon enthusiasm, perhaps because it celebrated an initiative unique to this campus. In “Too Close to Home,” we consider the special challenges posed when presenters aimed to bring home issues about which the audience had deeply held, perhaps ossified, preconceptions. Finally, in “Get Out of My House!” we examine Professor Lani Guinier’s keynote address at the May 2004 campus commencement. In Guinier’s address, as at many other *Brown* events, home was mapped onto the campus, the community, the state, and even the nation. Sometimes this mapping evoked sentimental attachment to a place or, more precisely, a moment in time in a place. But more often, as in Guinier’s address, the effect was to remind us that the sentimental entailments of homeplace metaphors paper over the reality of residential segregation and state-sanctioned poverty. Guinier, like other *Brown* speakers, used this critique of home to document people’s resilience in the face of symbolic and real racial violence.

3.2.1 A Homecoming for Affirmative Action

One of the *Brown* Commemoration’s first programs was also one of its most elaborate: a week-long program marking the 35th anniversary of Project 500, an initiative undertaken by the university in 1968 to enroll 500 African American and Latino students in the first-year class. Since the anniversary functioned, in part, as an officially sanctioned homecoming for the students originally admitted to the University of Illinois under the rubric of Project 500, it gave members of the campus and Champaign-Urbana communities an opportunity to reflect on their own histories and to take stock of matters of race—especially the status of affirmative action—at the University of Illinois in 2003. The Project 500 Anniversary was not, strictly speaking, a *Brown* Commemoration event. Planning for it developed, at least initially, apart from planning for the commemoration. Even so, by virtue of its success in “bringing it home,” we imagined that the anniversary celebration would model how other *Brown* Commemoration projects could “bring it home,” too. That did not turn out to be the case: the Project 500 Anniversary was seldom referenced during later events, and its inclusiveness—students, alumni, and members of the Champaign-Urbana community participated together—was, in retrospect, quite unusual. We will highlight and discuss this difference before turning to difficult questions raised by this unique commemoration of a campus event.

Many staff and students pointed to student participation in the Project 500 Anniversary program as both critical to its success and indicative of its departure from university business as usual. A student came up with the idea of marking the 35th anniversary, and students organized most of the week’s events. One event, in particular, was designed to put current students into the shoes of their predecessors. On Thursday, October 16, more than 500 students gathered outside the Illinois Street Residence Hall

(ISR), donned black commemorative T-shirts, and walked en masse several blocks across campus to the Quad; they were commemorating the day in 1968 when Project 500 students, who were being evicted from ISR, gathered with their supporters in the Student Union to stage an ad hoc protest for better living conditions on campus. When student leader Nneka Dudley, the chair of the committee on education for the campus chapter of the NAACP, was interviewed by Teresa, she described the special capacity of students to reach out and “bring it home” for their peers: “Students called upon each other to participate and the result was an astounding success. The goal for ‘The Walk’ was five hundred students. . . . Seven hundred attended. They ran out of shirts.” Teresa wrote, after interviewing Nneka, “As everyone was waiting for things to get started, students were on their cell phones calling their friends telling them that they NEEDED to get down to ISR and participate in the commemoration. . . . Thinking about the success and support of the student body gives me shivers as I sit here.”

Nneka used starkly different terms to describe other *Brown* Commemoration events, most of which followed the model of traditional university forums. Noting that the *Brown* Commemoration planning committee did not have a student subcommittee, she recalled that “a lot of the programs, from what I understand that they had, weren’t necessarily student-friendly. Meaning that they were dry or just like the whole ‘let’s sit down in a lecture and be lectured to at four o’clock over at Levis Faculty Center.’ It’s something that the students are not going to really want to be interested in. . . . I just really think they could have done a better job of reaching the student population in general, and not just trying to reach into the African American student population. It’s like the faculty in and of itself kind of commemorating *Brown*.” We see in this critique two points. First, it calls attention to the fact that questions of race and diversity should be pertinent and important to all students—not just to African American students or students of color. Second, Nneka’s comments challenged the adequacy of lectures, symposia, and seminars, upon which faculty members typically depend for scholarly dialogue, as venues for meaningfully engaging students. In these settings, where undergraduate students are typically marginalized, if not entirely ignored, by presentations assuming a specialist’s level of knowledge, faculty members dominate discussion and set a forbiddingly high standard for the right to talk. As a consequence, few students dare to join in follow-up questions and comments from the audience, and most are reduced to passive consumers. Project 500, on the other hand, fully engaged students as creators, organizers, and audience.

In part, we can attribute this level of engagement to that fact that the original Project 500 initiative, unlike the *Brown* decision, was a local event uniquely meaningful to the University of Illinois and its surrounding communities. This fact clearly galvanized alumni reaction to the Project 500 Anniversary, and no doubt contributed to its success in bringing the issues home. Much of the effort to mobilize participation from students, alumni, and the local community was organized through the African American Cultural Program, whose director, Nathaniel Banks, grew up in Champaign-Urbana and was one of the original Project 500 initiative students. Reflecting on the relation of the Project 500 Anniversary to the *Brown* Commemoration, Banks noted, “In the black community we didn’t really see *Brown* as a major force because it took so long for it to take hold. In Champaign, it took between 1954 and 1964 for there even to be talk about desegregation of schools. . . . But because I was a Project 500 student, I saw Project 500 as a defining

point in my life.” Teresa’s fieldnotes suggest that many Project 500 alumni were eager to talk with this generation of U of I students, and reveled in the opportunity to share stories of their struggles and experiences during college, to describe what their college experiences have meant for their lives after graduation, and to impress on current students the responsibility they have to continue the fight for racial justice.

The relationships between alumni and current students created by the Project 500 Anniversary not only excited the alumni and set the program apart from other *Brown* events, but also appeared to account for its remarkably powerful impact on students. The emotion and sense of intimacy generated in these relationships fostered current students’ dawning appreciation of their personal and direct connection to local living history. As Teresa remarked in the notes from her interview with Nneka Dudley, “Like . . . many others, Nneka liked those programs in which you ‘were sitting there with living history.’ It’s amazing to be able to talk to someone who can say, ‘These were the times, this was the social climate, I was there.’ The visits by the Freedom Riders, *Brown* Sisters, and the original Project 500 participants seem to be the programs that have the biggest impact on people. A chance for interaction with people who actually lived through times is invaluable.” But the Project 500 Anniversary had significance for current students beyond that of hearing historical figures like the Freedom Riders and *Brown* sisters speak. Students not only learned what it was like to be a student of color brought to the University of Illinois in 1968 by Project 500, but also saw, quite clearly and directly, how their own experience in 2003 connected to that historical moment. In part because they shared a sense of identity and home with the Project 500 alumni, they could see themselves as part of that still-evolving history.

It was with this developing understanding that students listened to speeches delivered on the Quad following the commemorative walk. One speech, which Rene and Teresa found especially moving, brought to light a theme raised by many *Brown* events: the tension between progress made toward racial justice since *Brown v. Board* and the considerable work that remains to be done if the full promise of *Brown* is to be realized. Anton Downing, a history major who helped organize the week’s program, told the crowd that the Project 500 Initiative had, in one year, tripled the enrollment of African American students at the university: “Think about if our population tripled again. How great would that be?” Downing also acknowledged that students of color arriving at U OF I in the 21st century face conditions far different from those confronting the students who began integrating the campus. When African Americans were first admitted to the university, they were not allowed to live in university dormitories; instead, they lived with African American families in the community, much like foreign exchange students might do. This description of the original Project 500 participants’ conditions elicited the strongest response from Rene and Teresa: they were most struck by the fact that, despite this segregationist legacy, Downing could argue that Project 500 instantly made the University of Illinois a “pillar” of affirmative action. Teresa could not accept this claim. Referring to continuing racial divisions and tensions on campus, she later remarked, “If the U of I was or is a pillar, we’re in a lot of trouble.” Downing did acknowledge that 35 years later, even as then Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s presence on the Urbana campus advanced a number of program initiatives and signaled a renewed commitment to affirmative action, much remains to be done. That work, he suggested, involves constantly holding the university to its commitment: since the budgets for such resources

as the Office of Minority Student Affairs and the African American Cultural Program are reviewed annually, students must stand ready each year to remind campus administrators of how much these entities are valued. To fully appreciate this complicated historical moment, Teresa and Rene had to reconcile their impulse to celebrate the progress represented by Project 500 with the ugly realities that gave rise to the need for affirmative action and persist in making it necessary today. Downing and those who spoke with him used the occasion of a homecoming to dramatize both what it once took to bring diversity to the U of I, and what it will now take to maintain and grow that diversity. It was not enough, he implied, for students of color to merely attend the University and assimilate to its ways. They must inhabit it, claim it as their home away from home, and with regularity demand the services that make it habitable without sacrificing racial or ethnic identity. To do so will require, among other things, that they grapple with the complexities of race relations among students on campus.

As students of color work to make the U of I a safe and comfortable home, as they work to overcome exclusion from campus settings and spaces that have historically been white, they face the ways in which differences among them as African, Latino/a, Native, and Asian Americans condition their relations with whites and with one another. Confusion around ownership of and participation in the Project 500 Anniversary illustrates this point. While all *Brown* Commemoration programs were open to the public, it was not clear to a number of students whether that was the case for the Project 500 Anniversary, particularly for the re-enactment of “The Walk.” Rene, who participated in the re-enactment, noted that “there were only a few students not of African American or Latino descent” at the march, and she acknowledged that as a white person she “felt a little awkward, not being black. . . . Like Teresa, I wish that the event had been publicized more. If it weren’t for my roommate, I might not have gone. Even if I had heard about it, but none of my African American friends were going, I don’t think I would be brave enough to go alone.” Clearly, students inclined to show solidarity across racial lines struggled with how to do so in this complex racial context. They worried about authenticity: if the original Project 500 students were predominantly African American, must the re-enactors in 2003 identify so as well? The question raised by Nneka about the Commemoration’s “job of reaching the student population in general, and not just trying to reach into the African American student population” resurfaces here, but in a different form. Students’ attempts to determine authenticity, ownership, and stake in the Project 500 Anniversary reflect broader unresolved questions about who decides how the university will move forward to meet the needs of, and become a true home to, an increasingly diverse student body.

3.2.2 Too Close to Home

Some efforts to bring matters of race home risked failing because they engaged topics that people are unwilling, unable, or unprepared to broach in productive ways. Such topics are typically viewed as off limits, and when raised are treated in a perfunctory manner. Often these topics simply touch too close to home—that is, they are too sensitive, personal, or revealing to be engaged honestly and openly in a public venue. Paul’s observations suggested that such was the case with discussions of Chief Illiniwek, then the U of I’s athletic symbol, during *Brown* Commemoration events. It is not unusual for discussions of race on the U of I campus to turn to the subject of Chief Illiniwek. It might have been all but impossible to prevent this from happening in a session billed as

“interactive” and titled “Images of Native Americans: Textbooks, Movies, and Mascots.” Perhaps because she understood this situation, Lakota Harden—a renowned orator, activist, community organizer, dancer, poet, and daughter of seven generations of devoted Lakota leaders—announced at the beginning of the session that, in Paul’s words, “She didn’t want to have a discussion focused on Chief Illiniwek. She said that instead of focusing the discussion on the stated topic, she . . . would have the Native people in the audience . . . talk about what their concerns were.” This event was held on the final evening of Harden’s three-day visit to the U of I, where, as a guest-in-residence at Unit One/Allen Hall, she lectured, led workshops, shared meals, and otherwise engaged in the intellectual and social life of this undergraduate living and learning community. By this point in her visit, she had no doubt heard a great deal about the contested views of the Chief on campus.

It seems likely that Harden sidestepped the Chief in this session because she understood that the Chief dialogue was so gridlocked, as opponents spoke past rather than to each other, that no attempt to “bring it home” to the Chief would be productive. Indeed, if there was one thing about which foes and supporters of the Chief could agree, it was the absence of a compromise position both sides could accept. In a written report to the U of I Board of Trustees in 2002, Trustee Roger Plummer had reached this conclusion after interviews with members of both camps, and reported that no compromise was possible. The ubiquitous nature of the Chief symbol and controversy at the U of I—always the elephant in the room—profoundly constrains meaningful dialogue on race on campus. In contrast to most of the other attempts made to bring it home, Harden’s decision illustrates that sometimes the furnishings of home are too familiar and too threadbare to stimulate new ways of looking at a problem. While we observe that it is typically productive to bring things home, we also note that when, in the name of bringing it home, people insist on the authenticity of their—and only their—position, genuine dialogue does not follow. Although she chose not to focus discussion on the Chief, Harden did “bring it home” in another way: she cleared a rhetorical space in which Native American students could testify to what it is like to be at the U of I on a daily basis, and other students could hear, digest, and perhaps begin to comprehend their testimony. What Native students had to say when given this opportunity exposed one of the challenges of bringing it home: the cultural tax or burden that people of color often shoulder in discussions of race that take place in settings dominated by whites. Paul described the first person to speak at the Harden event this way: “A Native student . . . said that she is tired of everyone thinking her identity is only in relation to the ‘Chief.’ She said that when someone meets her, the first thing they ask is not where she is from or about her schooling but instead her opinion on the ‘Chief’. . . . Anytime in one of her classes (from grade school on to the college level) Native Americans are discussed . . . she can see people turn and look at her to ‘see what the Indian says.’ “ Rene, who recognized this dynamic when reading Paul’s notes, added that it is a “similar situation to everyone looking at the African American in the class when talking about slavery or affirmative action.” Paul elaborated: “She said she does not even feel comfortable in the Native American class (it has close to 100 students, most of whom are white) since she is the only Native in the discussion section she was taking and they seem to do the same thing. . . . She said she came to the U of I to do nothing but get an education, but instead she was forced to get involved in being an activist because she could not deal with seeing

the ‘Chief’ logo everywhere without trying to do something about it. She said that she does not feel safe at the U of I and . . . that she is unable to ever just be a student because of the ‘Chief.’ She said that even though she is proud of her Native heritage she would like to have people look and relate to her as a person and not as the ‘Indian.’” Harden’s decision to sidestep the Chief issue may best be viewed as a successful effort to avoid calling on Native Americans to take a stand on or speak to the issue of the Chief. It is as if the Chief has made “home” uninhabitable. Thus, Harden brought it home by fostering an examination of images of Native Americans without recreating the Chief Illiniwek debate so many at U of I have learned to tune out. One can only conjecture how far this type of session and others like it might go to cultivate racial understanding. Paul observed that another Native student who participated in the session “said that she wonders why the pro-chiefers could not see past their own interests and see that the ‘Chief’ was hurting people. . . . She wondered why people would even consider ‘tradition’ to be more important than people.” Harden tried hard to foreground people over tradition, real lives over sentimental identification with symbols.

3.2.3 Get Out of My House!

Throughout the year, successful moves to bring it home led audiences to contemplate *Brown*’s influence on race relations, and, more generally, to take stock of contemporary understandings of race in America. The most provocative of these moves, a challenge to fundamental assumptions about the nature of home and home life, came during the culminating event of the *Brown* year—the university’s 133rd commencement—in the form of Professor Lani Guinier’s commencement address. Guinier, the first black woman to be appointed a tenured professor of law at Harvard University, argued that the University of Illinois family should include poor and minority students who have been—and to a substantial degree continue to be—excluded from admission. In so doing, she prompted consideration of the question, “For whom is this university home?” In the days following commencement, some who attended, and even some who did not, made the answer clear. In letters to administrators and calls to a local radio station, they answered, in tones of anger and hurt, with a refrain that we distill as “Not you! Get out of my house!” Here, we explore Guinier’s address and audience reaction to it.

The university commencement was, for the most part, a joyous occasion on which thousands of students, families, and friends gathered in Assembly Hall to celebrate the conferral of degrees and contemplate the graduates’ passage into a new phase of life. In his introductory remarks, President James Stukel touched on several themes commonplace in commencement rhetoric. After calling graduation one of “life’s singular accomplishments,” he reminded graduates that in their moment of achievement, they in fact “stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us,” specifically “the generations of men and women who have added to the glory of making this such a wonderful and great university.” These men and women, according to Stukel, form the “Illinois family,” a “fellowship” of alumni dedicated to maintaining the institution’s status as a “great public university.” Stukel entreated the graduates to take this “kinship” seriously, “to keep that bond strong.” Only by maintaining this bond, he suggested, would graduates meet their “responsibility to extend the same wonderful possibility to those that follow you, just as those who preceded you have done on your behalf.” What was their reward for acting responsibly? Stukel concluded his remarks with this promise:

“Wherever you go, know that you are and always will be welcome here as you come back to campus.”

A short time later, the combined campus choruses—the Varsity Men’s Glee Club, the Women’s Glee Club, and the Black Chorus—joined for “Illinois,” the state song. The lyrics of the first stanza speak sentimentally of “rivers gently flowing” and “prairies verdant growing,” a placid downstate idyll offering graduates a respite from the promised rigors of life beyond school. Yet even the state song reminds listeners that a dear price was paid so that “mellow tones” might “echo on the breeze / rustling through the leafy trees” of the graduates’ home state. The song’s final stanza recalls the “wondrous story” of Illinoisans’ heroism and sacrifice in the nation’s war to end slavery.

With the themes of mutuality, responsibility, and sacrifice still echoing through the Hall, Professor Lani Guinier rose to deliver the invited commencement address. She began by gesturing to the day’s honorary degree recipients, five of whom were African American, noting that she was proud to “stand on the shoulders of giants like these in speaking to you, as requested, about the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.” In her address, Guinier examined the legacy of *Brown*, judging it an important statement of Constitutional principle. “In the minds of most legal scholars,” she noted, “that decision is a Constitutional icon.” She agreed with Ted Shaw, the Director Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, who has argued that by declaring segregation unconstitutional, the court in *Brown* “breathed life, finally, into the Constitution for African Americans.” Guinier attributed the progress made in the 50 years following *Brown* to the “combination of a legal declaration of principle and the fearlessness of those civil rights activists, who rewrote the law with their marching feet.” Despite this success, Guinier argued *Brown* was a failure “when measured by current reality.” Describing this reality, and in so doing “bringing it home,” she observed that “right here in the state of Illinois, we see that this state is the second most segregated state in the country for Blacks attending public school. This state is the fifth most segregated in the country for Latinos attending public school. Forty-eight percent of black students graduate from high school. Fifty-eight percent of Latinos graduate from high school. Eighty-three percent of white students graduate from high school.” Later, considering the implications of *Brown*’s failure in the arena of higher education, she cited a study of “146 of the most selective colleges and universities in the country, including the University of Illinois,” which found “that a disproportionate number of students going to public institutions of higher education come from the most affluent portions of our society.” Seventy-four percent of students at these institutions come from the top twenty-five percent of the population as measured by socioeconomic status indicators while only three percent come from the bottom twenty-five percent of the population, and only ten percent come from the bottom half of the population. Paraphrasing the study’s author, she concluded that “higher education has become a gift from the poor to the rich. The poor people are paying taxes and the rich people are getting an education.” This line drew loud applause during the morning ceremony, attended primarily by students in the liberal arts and sciences, but no applause at all during the afternoon ceremony for engineering, agriculture, fine arts, and education students. Guinier’s suggestion that the failure to make good on the promise of *Brown* could be “turned inside out to become success” resonated with one audience, but not with the other.

Having located issues of inequality within the confines of the state, and at the state's flagship university, Guinier turned to ways in which the social fractures left in the wake of *Brown* might be healed by the graduates, whom she figured as leaders of their generation capable of driving social reform. She implored the graduates to join forces across race and class lines, and to accept responsibility for such reform. To this end, she invoked the metaphor of the coal miners' canary. To protect themselves from lethal odorless gases, coal miners once carried canaries into the mines, relying on the birds' delicate physiology as an early warning system. When the birds' health began to fail, the miners would exit ahead of disaster. Guinier urged the commencement day assembly to think of America's poor and minorities as society's canaries, whose struggles ought to alert broader society to imminent threat. She argued, "This to me is the challenge for you as the leaders of tomorrow. . . . [Light applause]. We have to become canary watchers. We have to learn from our mistakes that we cannot pathologize the canary, because if we fail to heed the lesson of the canary, we will all be suffocating in a toxic mine. . . . We need to begin to see the relationship between success and community . . . to appreciate those who link their fate, who work to ensure that the community will invest in all of us so that we can all succeed—so that we can all appreciate the benefits of a great public education such as the education that you have received here at the University of Illinois."

A traditional function of commencement is to instill in graduates the idea that the university has been and will continue to be their home. Having sheltered, protected, and nurtured them, the alma mater hopes and expects that its graduates will continue to express their attachment to home with generous (financial) support. On one level, Guinier deployed the most conventional of graduation-day tropes. Like President Stukel, she paid tribute to those on whose "shoulders" she now stands; like Stukel, she entreated the graduates to recognize their responsibility to future generations; like Stukel, she did this by linking her words to local circumstance. Guinier, however, challenged convention to the point of destroying it. By calling attention to those who have not been and still are not "at home" at the university, Guinier unsettled the comfort of home for some graduates and their families and friends. Moreover, the near naming of white privilege adds entirely new hues to Stukel's ordinary invocation of the "privilege" attained by university graduates. What Guinier exposed, of course, is that privilege comes at a price, since haves imply have-nots, and in this case not just any have-nots. She underscored that ethnic minority families pay taxes like all other families to underwrite university operations, yet their children are demonstrably under-represented in the University of Illinois student body. What is novel about this assertion is not its injection of racial politics into what was expected to be a race-neutral proceeding. After all, race was signified in many ways throughout the ceremony: by the multicolored Kente sashes worn by students affiliated with the African American Cultural Program, by the choice of honorary degree recipients, by the voices of the Black Chorus, and even in the state song's allusion to the Civil War. Nor was there anything especially novel about asking graduates to examine their own circumstances. The same holds for urging graduates to act in causes for social justice. What was novel, however—and what elicited negative response in the weeks following the ceremony—is the way Guinier yoked together race, privilege, and obligation. She asserted that the shoulders one is privileged to stand upon at graduation represent not just one's academic forebears, as President Stukel had said, but others as well, including those who have historically been denied access to the

institution. Consequently, one's debt is not only to past generations of students admitted to the university, but also to those who continue to be excluded. She extended the metaphor of family to include those who are absent from the table, but prepared or served its viands. Once these absent family members are remembered, graduates' obligations extend to joining others in combating the injustice of their exclusion, even if that means withdrawing privilege from those who have come to consider a seat at the table an entitlement rather than a gift.

Audience resistance to Guinier's analysis, bitterly expressed in letters and email messages to university administrators, exposed the contours and fault lines that shape discourse on diversity and race at the University of Illinois. For some, the radical departure from the canonical commencement address, particularly Guinier's reflection on the importance of learning from and overcoming failure, was deeply demoralizing. Guinier spoke frankly about some of the most difficult moments in her own life, when she felt defeated and unable to go on, but she also characterized them as opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed in ways she never imagined possible. She recalled civil rights struggles that illustrated the parallel point for communities, namely that diverse communities can learn from and overcome failure. Yet, for many in the commencement audience, a message meant to engage imaginations and lift spirits had a quite opposite effect. One parent wrote: "We were anticipating words of encouragement and celebration. What we received instead was a speech about dead canaries and failure. . . . Our daughter was so discouraged by the continual and redundant use of the 'f' word (failure) that she honestly felt discouraged rather than uplifted. She felt defeated before she even had a chance to begin her life outside the hallowed halls of learning." Another parent simply asked, "Was this inspirational?" Clearly, this segment of the audience identified with neither the community nor the pain of failure Guinier so eloquently invoked. Analysis of Guinier's address on a local talk radio program pointed out that Guinier mentioned the word "failure" 31 times, and "success" only 13 times. Unable or unwilling to hear how success can grow out of failure, some audience members heard only failure itself. Nor did they understand that Guinier was describing for middle-class whites the possibility of solidarity with poor whites and people of color, all of whom, she was claiming, have lost or will soon lose access to elite public universities as state support continues to decline. While Guinier may have failed in bringing home this message, she at least succeeded in provoking discomfort—and thereby thought—in her audience.

If some felt defeated by the call to consider the contemporary challenges of racial injustice in their own lives, others felt attacked by what they viewed as shameless promotion of a political agenda "designed to stir up racial hatred" at the Commencement ceremony. One parent stated, "I felt that we were brought to the University under the guise of a Commencement for our sons and daughters only to find ourselves a captive audience for your agenda-driven speaker." Another suggested, "I do not know this person, but if it was her intention to offend many of the parents in the audience she succeeded." A third offered, "If it was meant to shame me . . . it didn't work. If it was meant to be an incendiary speech it was a huge success." Perhaps feeling betrayed by university administrators who had failed to protect the sanctity of home, some took the short step from questioning Guinier's motives to questioning those of the university officials who had invited her to speak. "We can only hope and pray," one person wrote,

“that Ms. Guinier was speaking on her own behalf and the views she espoused are not the views of the public university to which our many tax dollars flow.” Others did not hesitate to assert that the university endorsed Guinier’s views, as this message states: “I know the University had to know the content of Ms. Guinier’s ‘commencement address’ and can’t find the words to express how upset and disgusted I was during her soap box rant.” If university administrators would not protect the home front, this segment of the audience was prepared to do so themselves.

The first line of defense was to distinguish those who have legitimate claim to call the university “home” from those who do not. Provoked by Guinier’s analysis, some in the University of Illinois family called the ownership of the university into question: “I was appalled and disgusted to hear the venom spewed from her mouth. It was a disgrace that the University of Illinois not only gave her a platform from which she was able to express her views but also gave her an honorary doctorate. No doubt it is people like your speaker who are also trying to get rid of our Chief. These people have absolutely NO interest in our University, NO love for our University with its history and heritage; they simply want to USE our University as a Political Tool. I resent the fact that Ms. Guinier was given that opportunity.” When Guinier’s ideas challenged parents’ and students’ views of university business as usual, particularly their sense of ownership of the university, her status as a disinterested “outsider” was invoked to discredit her. The logic was identical to that used against Chancellor Cantor in the debates about Chief Illiniwek: only those who have no interest or investment in the university, or those who fail to love it—only outsiders—could see the university as Guinier does. Imputing outsider status to Guinier was intended to undermine any authority she might have had to speak to life at the University of Illinois. By implication, those who share Guinier’s views were cast as outsiders, too, not as family members with who, despite their differences, “home” must be shared. Construing ownership this way provides justification for treating as outsiders the very same poor and minority citizens who have systematically been denied admission—those perhaps inclined to share Guinier’s views. Construing ownership this way seeks to silence competing voices, even though the university is a public institution that, arguably, should accommodate diverse views and values.

Letters and emails like these grounded their writers’ ownership of the university not only in claims of loyalty to the university’s history and heritage, but also, to a significant degree, in the paying of taxes and tuition. At the heart of many negative reactions, perhaps especially for white families that struggled financially to put their children through the University of Illinois, was difficulty accepting Guinier’s claim that “higher education has become a gift from the poor to the rich.” Hard work, sacrifice, and dogged pursuit of opportunity figured prominently in the prevailing counter-narrative. As one upset father wrote: “To tell the parents of students who have worked their entire life (sometimes 2 jobs) to put themselves and their children through college that they got there on the backs of the poor . . . please. My son received no financial assistance whatsoever. . . . I am not RICH, nor do I live in the SUBURBS. I am just the middle class backbone of this country. And if I am not mistaken, it is my taxes that support most of the programs that help the less fortunate. . . . I am where I am today and my son graduated Sunday because we worked hard. Therefore, I was deeply offended to hear how I and my son have gotten to where we are, not through our own effort and talents, but via displacement of the poor. The public education system is in place for all the public, not

just the poor public.” Another father echoed, “To say that the taxes of the poor have put my children through school is just wrong. Yes, my wife and I are white, suburban, middle class parents, but we are born of immigrants who came to this country with nothing, and grew up in the inner city. We took advantage of the opportunities that were available to us, which I might add are far less than those being offered today to poor students. For her to generalize and tell us that the taxes of the poor are paying to educate my children shows me that she has not spent a lot of time looking at my tax bill and where those dollars are spent.” Another parent “took extreme exception to Ms. Guinier’s” argument: “Since when do only poor men pay taxes? . . . Our daughter has a ridiculous amount of debt now that she has passed through the public education system. Certainly this gift Ms. Guinier spoke of must have gone to someone other than our daughter. I am aghast that this woman dare suggest that our child and thousands like her have achieved an educational goal only while trodding across the hard-working back of some misrepresented and woe-begone poor man.” For many parents, Guinier’s message may have touched too close to home.

These reactions may betray some confusion about Guinier’s admittedly complex argument, which required the audience to digest likely-unfamiliar statistics, understand how higher education is financed, take a historical view of inequalities in access to higher education, and identify across racial and class lines. Guinier did not argue that graduates’ and their parents’ hard work was not central to their commendable academic accomplishments. Guinier’s attempt to bring it home led some in the audience who felt that their sacrifice was not adequately appreciated to react defensively. Her message appears to have hit home in an uncomfortable way. One often sees, across the state, bumper stickers reading, “My child and my money go to the University of Illinois.” More than a joke, this message names a sensitive issue: when parents have paid for their child’s university education, they expect some recognition of their efforts, perhaps especially on Commencement Day. In this context, some parents could not reconcile what they believed they had rightfully earned with the idea that in higher education the state’s affluent families benefit at the expense of the poor. That they perceived their own taxes to be benefiting the poor appears only to have contributed to the problem.

In bringing her message home to graduates and their families and friends, Guinier asked for more than some in her audience were prepared to give. She asked that they confront the issue of unequal access to public education right here in the state of Illinois. She challenged them to broaden their cherished notions of family, home, and community to make room for historically excluded others. In effect, she asked less affluent whites, those who had to sacrifice the most to see their children graduate, to identify with people of color. In solidarity, she argued, they might stake their claim to the university. But on a day when the less affluent celebrated their ticket up and out of modest circumstances—a college degree—many of them chose to identify with the affluent instead. Rather than expand their notions of community and invite new members in, they demanded that the perceived interlopers get out.

3.3 Conclusion

Efforts to bring things home throughout the *Brown* Commemoration year forced event participants and audiences to grapple with the local realities of diversity and race. Whether these efforts illuminated racial dynamics in the university, the cities of Champaign and Urbana, Chicago and its suburbs, or the state of Illinois, bringing it home challenged “business as usual” at the university. In these moments, abstract racial issues came to life in concrete local experience. Objectivity and rationality gave way to subjectivity and emotionality. In the most successful and hopeful of these moments, *Brown* event participants felt themselves to be part of both the history and future of race and diversity in America and the American university. In the most divisive moments, participants sought to deny participation in history and close the ranks of those who could claim title to the university.

Together, “The Grammar of Race” and “Bringing it Home” reveal received practices and discourses on race and diversity at the university. They expose an academic discourse that is largely colorblind and generally comfortable celebrating diversity, a discourse that for the most part does not seriously inspect racism either at the university or in the local community. The successful challenges to university business as usual described in this chapter often made audiences uncomfortable to the point of provoking serious resistance to change. But resistance or no, these efforts set the stage for going beyond the university’s business as usual, opening up possibilities for new and productive dialogue and action, new ways of thinking and doing race and diversity. In the next chapter, we explore some of the ways in which various *Brown* year producers and audiences—students, university administrators, faculty and staff, and members of the local community—envisioned these efforts and experienced their effects.