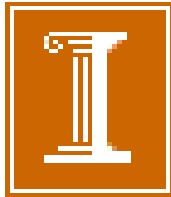


**ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT ON THE JUBILEE
COMMEMORATION OF THE *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*
SUPREME COURT DECISION, University of Illinois**



Prepared for the
Jubilee Commemoration Organizing Committee

Ethnography of the *Brown* Commemoration Team

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2.0 Introduction

In the academic year 2003-04, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign hosted a year-long, comprehensive “Jubilee Commemoration” of *Brown v. Board of Education* (hereafter “*Brown*”), the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision on school desegregation. On- and off-campus units and individuals were invited to apply for Jubilee Commemoration funding to support events, performances, lectures, readings, films, and exhibits. This initiative resulted in hundreds of events that were, in turn, supplemented by many unofficial but related gatherings. The U of I’s effort stands as perhaps the most extensive attempt by a U.S. university to launch a comprehensive conversation on race and diversity through the commemoration of *Brown*. As a supplement to this enormous effort, campus administrators decided to study the commemoration itself: hence the genesis of the Ethnography of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Jubilee Commemoration—EBC for short. EBC, a 10-person research collaborative comprised of undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty, used ethnographic methods including sustained participant observation, interviews, and field research to study both the public life of the Commemoration year and the campus’s broader “dialogue” on race and diversity. The EBC charge was a very open one, stipulating only a preliminary report due by mid-November, 2004. The decision to close this expanded report with recommendations is our own.

EBC was born of both serendipity and careful vision. Serendipity arrived in the form of a campus visitor from the National Science Foundation, who happened to meet on the same day in the autumn of 2003 with members of the *Brown* Commemoration Planning Committee and organizers of the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI, then EOTU, the Ethnography of the University). She concluded that individuals involved in the two campus-wide initiatives would do well to contemplate the possibility of EUI documenting *Brown*. The careful vision can be credited to the *Brown* Commemoration Planning Committee, and to then-Chancellor Nancy Cantor and then-Provost Richard Herman, who jointly chaired the *Brown* Committee. Further, Cantor had designated EUI as one of several Cross Campus Initiatives meant to spur inquiry across disciplinary boundaries, and provided funding to initiate its work. Together, she and committee members envisioned how EUI’s commitment to undergraduate research and to serious, reflective institutional self-examination could result in both documentation and interpretation of the year-long campus effort. Consequently, EUI was commissioned to compose a team that would study the *Brown* Commemoration year. EUI agreed to this arrangement with the understanding that undergraduates—compensated for their time—would be the project’s primary ethnographers. In October 2003, a group of four undergraduates, two graduate students, and four faculty members set to work observing, interviewing, discussing, and writing.

Many months into this project in Spring 2004, the EBC team had an “a-ha” moment—which came, fittingly, immediately after a group interview with Chancellor Cantor. In that moment, we recognized that we were not outsiders studying the *Brown* Commemoration, but instead a critical part of the Commemoration itself. Although we had learned day by day that the commemoration meant many things to its various constituents, it was, by original intent, an ambitious effort to engineer a campus dialogue on race and diversity. Chancellor Cantor developed this point several times during the

interview, and, as we left the Swanlund Administration Building, we could not help but realize that the commemoration had mobilized us as an instance of the larger *Brown* vision—a group of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty engaged in a nearly year-long dialogue on race and diversity on our campus. This report, then, is in large part the product of our own dialogue, which is one thread among many of the Commemoration and draws from a number of strands of campus conversation.

By the time EBC was ready to begin drafting this report, with seven months of undergraduate ethnography behind us, we had amassed an online database containing a wealth of fieldnotes, namely the student ethnographers' reports on *Brown* events as well as interviews and other research-related observations and activities. The web-archived fieldnotes, ranging from two to eight pages per entry, were then commented on in writing by all of the members of the EBC research team. These documents became rich conversations in their own right, commanding copious responses, criticisms, connections, and queries.

We want to underscore that this report is not a program evaluation: in these pages we do not proclaim the success or denounce the failure of the *Brown* Commemoration. We do, however, take seriously the *Brown* year's ambitious goal: to spearhead a campus-wide "dialogue" on race at the university. Such a dialogue is hard to capture, let alone quantify; harder still is the matter of gauging what sort of difference such a dialogue might make, or how it might transform the university. We do aim in this report to listen and look in on meaningful and productive moments of the *Brown* year. At the same time, we try to remain alert to unrealized potential and even profound disappointment. We understand that "effects" are hard to pin down. Indeed, the effects are still in the making on a campus that continues to struggle with the challenges of race and inequality.

The first chapter of our report, "Beyond the University as Usual," draws from the public face of the *Brown* year—its public events. We argue that a productive campus dialogue on race and diversity emerged from those *Brown* moments in which "business as usual" at the university was challenged. We organize those challenges to what we call "the university register" (i.e., its prevailing ideas) in two rhetorical categories. In the chapter's first section, "The Grammar of Race," we consider moments in the *Brown* events that exposed, questioned, or disrupted the logic of race. We highlight strategies employed by both speakers and audience members that expose unarticulated rules and patterns underlying the representations of race in the contemporary university. In the second section of chapter 1, "Bringing It Home," we examine how speakers and audiences at many events worked to bring the issues of diversity and race home to the U of I community, including the university itself, the cities of Champaign and Urbana, the city of Chicago and its suburbs that many undergraduates call home, and the state of Illinois. Verbal acts of "bringing it home" violated the university's conventional discourse, in which people talk about social objects and relations external to the university in objective and distant terms. These challenging and disruptive moments charged participants to acknowledge that these are our issues, and that this is our reality, and called on them to confront race and grapple with it in their own lives.

Chapter 2, "Upon Reflection: Envisioning, Experiencing, and Acting on the *Brown* Year," draws from conversations about the year's commemorative events, some of them formal interviews, some of them small talk made in fleeting moments. In turn, the chapter is structured to produce a conversation between the planners and producers of the year

and its various audiences. Just as we show that the architects of the year responded to the commemoration in different ways, so do we highlight the enormous diversity of *Brown* audiences. In the chapter's first section, "The Producers," we draw from conversations with key figures in the *Brown* year, specifically Chancellor Nancy Cantor and the Organizing Committee Co-chairs Susan Fowler and Tom Ulen. We call them "producers" metaphorically to highlight the role Cantor, Fowler, and Ulen played in gathering the resources and delegating the tasks of the commemoration. In cinematic terms, they actually served as "executive producers," while "line producers" in the various units across campus implemented the organizing committee's collective vision. We thus examine how the commemoration's architects imagined both the year and its effects on the campus and community, and highlight the distinctive ways in which each of them understood the meaning of "dialogue" and "university transformation." In "The Next Generation," we report student analyses of what this year meant—and did not mean—to them. In "Summoning Students," we consider how *Brown* events called on students as either the generation that had abandoned the mantle of civil rights struggles or as the hope of future efforts. We reflect upon the radical differences and comparative efficacies of these calls as they attempted to motivate this next generation to organize and act. "Answering the Call" follows a handful of students who acted on the *Brown* year in some concrete way. Exceptional as these students may be, they have helped us think about what it means for a campus to engage seriously the lived campus experience of race and diversity. Finally, in "Students Connecting around Controversy," we turn to the fabric of student conversation during the daily life of the *Brown* year. Here we examine informal conversation about the commemoration that does not necessarily produce events or new social groups, but nonetheless "makes a difference." In the chapter's third section, "Rethinking the University through *Brown*," we follow a number of people both in and beyond the university who reflected on the commemoration, the relationship between the university and its communities, and the university itself. " 'You Can't Take Potential to the Bank,' " introduces evaluations of the commemoration itself. In " 'Maybe I Have to Write the Book Myself,' " we highlight the voices of those attending and participating in commemoration events who took to heart *Brown*'s stated interest in reaching out to the community. Our interlocutors are eloquent on the promise and, alas, more often than not on the failures of that ambition. In " 'And Hell, This Is a Public Institution,' " we observe how reflections on the *Brown* commemoration and university-community relations engage the very *raison d'être* of the university itself.

Chapter 3, "The ABCs of EBC," offers our own story, which we tell as yet another window for gaining perspective on the university. We consider the EBC story worth telling for several reasons. We appreciate that collaborative ethnographic work is rare—and rarer still when it brings together undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. As we wrote this report, particularly chapter 1, we came to appreciate that EBC itself, however modestly, mounted its own challenge to university business as usual. In the course of our research, we could not find an example of a collaborative ethnographic study authored by a diverse group of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty—people with quite different investments in the university register. We quickly learned, however, that such an intimate collaboration proved essential because the *Brown* year was an exhausting whirlwind of events, exhibits, and performances. The sheer number and breadth of events organized by the campus community overwhelmed the student

ethnographers, and the EBC team knew from our first day, a month after the commemoration had begun, that we would never be able to “capture” *Brown* in full. As time passed, however, we had enough of a sense for the landscape of the year that we could “register” what stood out, and what differentiated those moments that enabled dialogue to go beyond facile mention of diversity to serious reflection on the still-salient topics of living with racism and its legacies.

The EBC story also has much to contribute to considerations of the technical aspects of collaborative research. EBC took shape through a number of web-based technologies that have affected the course and nature of the project. Indeed, we argue that technologies are a critical part of collaborative ethnographic research and writing. In this chapter we are candid about our shortcomings because we hope that projects resembling EBC might take root and succeed on other campuses. In underscoring these shortcomings, we want to consider what about the university register, its “business as usual” mode makes projects like this one difficult to execute. The chapter begins by introducing “The Ethnography of the University Initiative,” then reviews the history of the *Brown* Commemoration ethnography in two sections, “From EUI to EBC” and “The Research Team.” Finally, in “The Day to Day of Student Ethnography,” we examine the logistical, technical, and managerial aspects of the project. “Drafting this Report” concludes the chapter, reviewing how this collaboratively authored report took shape.

It is critical to underscore that our ethnography captures only a fraction of *Brown* events: local readers may be disappointed by what is not here. We attended events selectively, and in turn have documented them selectively here. Further, while there is some method to our selection of which events to attend and which to feature here, there is also an element of chance, dictated by the passions or interests of one or another ethnographer, the happenstance of schedules, the lack of accessible information on the timing of *Brown* events, and the tastes of our writing team. With its resolutely local lens, ethnography is necessarily partial: the ethnographer attends one event and misses another; she talks to one person rather than another; her attention is drawn to one corner of the room and not another, and so on. The hubris of ethnography, however, is that the accretion of events, moments, and conversations leads to observations and analyses that move past anecdotal reportage toward recognition of embedded social structures and ideologies. In this spirit, the best ethnography is necessarily long-term: unfortunately, as chapter 3 documents in considerable detail, the ethnographic research that comprises this report was begun hastily and conducted by undergraduates with full course loads, and directed by faculty and graduate students who were not relieved of any of their regular university duties. One of the commentators on an earlier draft of this report charged us with “drive-by ethnography,” calling attention to the partial and perhaps hurried nature of the project. In response, chapter 3 offers both a discussion of the project’s limits and a call for more sustained and well-planned collaborative ethnographic projects of this sort. Chapter 3 also introduces the wish list of activities we had hoped to include but could not because of time or logistical constraints. We had wanted to spend more time with the many people who for whatever reason had absolutely nothing to do with the *Brown* year; we had planned to follow up on more of the project proposals that were not funded by the *Brown* Committee; we had intended to trace the paths of individuals or groups who were in one way or another touched by *Brown* events. Long as our list of unfulfilled desires

and ambitions may be, we nonetheless believe that this report of what we did observe, discuss, and analyze remains valuable.

Readers of this report will also recognize that it embodies a distinct point of view: drawing on events, conversations, and interviews, this is necessarily an interpretive work. We have made sense of our materials through our own particular lenses. The fieldnotes themselves are colored by these lenses, as were the many on- and off-line discussions we had about our data. Far from being hasty, the interpretations offered here are the result of substantial labor; in some cases, single interpretive sentences have been culled from hours of conversation about a single, brief moment at an event. Because the report draws from the work of ten people, and from a six-person writing team, it is very hard to assign the “we” of the writing to one or another person’s particular subjectivity; this said, however, we are happy to claim the report as a subjective venture and to acknowledge that the interpretations are informed by ‘who we are.’ In “The Research Team” in Chapter 3, we introduce some aspects of those subjectivities and explain how we undertook, at the micro-level, the processes of interpretation that resulted in this report. At this moment, we want to emphasize the fact that four undergraduate students—Rene Bangert, Paul Davis, Nicole Ortégón, and Teresa Ramos—did all the ethnographic fieldwork; further, Teresa participated in all subsequent discussions and writing leading to this report.

Every group of people, and every project, accumulates its own idiom—key words, phrases, and even jokes—and EBC was no exception. We spare you the jokes, but the key words and phrases are front and center in the pages that follow. None is more important, perhaps, than the term “register,” and we are grateful to linguistic anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli, who brought it to our attention. We began to refer to the “university register” as shorthand for the myriad of unspoken rules and norms of language that govern everything that happens at a university or, for that matter, in any human community or institution. We focused on how a dialogue on race is shaped by the university register, the received university mode of representing the world, which we have also called “business as usual.” In this vein, we stress the conventions of academic talk, which often treat race as a distant object for objective study. Further, we note that race is often taken up at the university through the term “multiculturalism,” which manages to elide difficult conversations that confront the reality of race on this campus. When we first encountered the term “register” in early April 2004, it spoke volumes to us for a simple reason: we had become collectively more and more interested in those moments, conversations, and actions that somehow broke or challenged business as usual at the university. We were drawn to those challenges because we considered them to be the moments of the *Brown* Commemoration year that truly had the potential to spark a meaningful campus dialogue on race and diversity.

Business as usual with respect to race at the university presented an irony. The *Brown* year resulted in many campus conversations about the value of diversity, but a dearth of dialogue about the many unsettling aspects of race and inequality in the contemporary United States. We suggest that this irony speaks to our historical moment. In 2003, the *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger* decisions on admissions at the University of Michigan affirmed the high court’s 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision, in which Justice Powell wrote that educational diversity is a compelling state interest. While the *Grutter* and *Gratz* decisions supported diversity as a

primary value in higher education that contributes to an institutional brand of excellence, they also narrowly tailored the role race can play in admissions decisions. The Supreme Court represented educational diversity as an asset for corporate and military America, but emptied the term of any meaningful reference to historical inequities and injustices. As if to attest to that emptying, when the Supreme Court issued a decision in 2007 striking down desegregation plans of school districts in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky, every justice on the bench, whether in the majority or the dissenting minority, declared that their position represented the fulfillment of *Brown*. In short, there is much that the *Brown* decision and the various and disparate ways it has been commemorated, cited, and memorialized, can tell us about ourselves, our values, and our continuing quest for social justice.