

Book Review

A New Day in the Delta: Inventing School Desegregation as You Go.

Beckwith, David W.

Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.

296 pages.

Reviewed by
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Though *Brown v. Board of Education* happened in 1954, through various maneuvers and a reliance on local option politics, many Mississippi school districts had yet to integrate by 1969. In the Delta community of Leland, Mississippi, the school superintendent sought to cushion the blow of desegregated schools by integrating the teaching staff first. To that end, he hired a recently graduated white business major from Ole Miss to teach history to students at the district's black school. David W. Beckwith was massively unqualified for the job. It was, the account claims, his willingness to take the job that was his principal qualification, though the author provides no evidence that the district made any concerted effort to find actually qualified teachers for the position.

So begins Beckwith's memoir, *A New Day in the Delta: Inventing School Desegregation as You Go*. He goes on to explain that Leland was under a federal court order to desegregate, and that the hiring of white teachers for the district's black school was a strategy to delay integration while still qualifying for federal funding. Still, it got him a job, and Beckwith's first days with the faculty produced the telling series of revelations expected of an educated white southerner meeting educated black southerners for the first time. The problem with Beckwith's account is that the revelations obviously only went so far. Beckwith adds dialog to his memoir for dramatic effect, which is problematic because of the narrative's absolute reliance on it and its caricatured depiction of black student speech. Though it is hard for a reader to believe that any resident of Leland, Mississippi was without a relatively significant accent, only the black students are depicted as speaking in dialect.

This kind of presentation ultimately causes broader problems with the manuscript. Beckwith begins the school year with the unsurprising prob-

lems of poor discipline and academic performance, but he begins to make an impact on the students and create a positive rapport. His manuscript is self-serving, as are all memoirs, but when combined with the dialect problems, *A New Day in the Delta* becomes uncomfortably paternalistic. In an effort to broaden the students' horizons, for example, Beckwith decides to require the parents of each of his students to provide seventy-five cents for a subscription to *Junior Scholastic Magazine* because he had found it rewarding when he was a student. Some of the parents did not provide the money, either because they expected schoolbooks to be provided by the state or because they couldn't afford the excess whims of their children's teacher. Beckwith explains that he paid for the subscriptions himself, and after wrestling with whether or not to provide them to students who never provided seventy-five cents, he decides to give magazines to all of his students. It was a nice gesture from Beckwith, but at the same time, the notion of a white man deciding what's best for black students based solely on memories of his own childhood, then forcing their impoverished parents to pay for his notions or to accept charity in its stead is nothing if not a display of Old South paternalism.

Of course, that display can also be incredibly helpful for those attempting to understand the racial negotiations that took place between white and black during the integrationist period, the legacy of those negotiations, and the makeup of the white mind in their wake. Ultimately, Beckwith's would not remain the only white mind in his school. Leland's delaying tactics were unsuccessful, and the integration of students began in Beckwith's second semester. The number of violent confrontations increased. The racism of the white students and teachers was evident. The viability of the Leland schools and of Beckwith's classroom, however, was maintained largely by the sense of inevitability felt by everyone involved.

During the students' integration, Beckwith noticed that the abject poverty of many of the white students matched that of his black charges. At the same time, as locals outside of the school began railing against the integration, the Leland Chapter of the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race blamed "limousine liberals," who made their fortunes on the backs of white workers and sent their children to private schools, for the new heresy. Beckwith makes clear that poverty played a substantial role in all aspects of both racial tensions and education in Mississippi, driving both the poor performance of students and the poor reactions of adults.

The racism of those adults was paramount, as Beckwith found himself threatened both by white supremacist groups and parents of disgruntled and underperforming white students because his previous semester as a white

teacher of solely black classrooms gave them reason to doubt his authenticity and racial loyalty. Racial loyalty dominated within the teaching fraternity, as well. Beckwith and his two white colleagues who began the school year at the black school had joined the black teacher's union, for example. After the integration, their colleagues unsuccessfully tried to pressure them into switching to the white union, and tensions remained even between white members of the faculty because of the suspicion of divided loyalties. As Beckwith frankly admits, "The racial divide had begun to dominate every facet of school life" (228).

That it did. The problems don't abate as *A New Day in the Delta* comes to its conclusion. The students and teachers both complete a difficult and traumatic school year, but there are obviously more problems to come. Beckwith would not be in the system to experience them, as his time in the Leland schools helped him decide to attend graduate school. He did, however, return more than thirty years later to relive his year in the system. Beckwith's epilogue, written after his return, emphasizes the fates of those who had played prominent roles in his brief teaching life. But perhaps more significantly, the school system is still there. Its first difficult integrated year was followed by more difficult years, its problems only exacerbated by the same poverty and closed-society thinking that hurt them in the 1960s, but as of 2003 the system was, if not thriving, at least unflaggingly stable. Overt racism and more subtle paternalism have given way to a general acceptance that allows all of Leland's students and teachers to benefit from the difficult work of Beckwith and his colleagues, achieving the goal of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

A New Day in the Delta is an interesting and remarkably revealing account of one Mississippi community's late school desegregation, but it doesn't do the work of unpacking its content for the reader. It is less an analysis of desegregation, and more a remembered tale of a long-ago participation—a primary source that stops at the water's edge of objective analysis. That being the case, the narrative explains just as much about the mind of Beckwith and similar reluctant white southerners swept up in a process that they had lost the ability to control. And in that effort, the memoir is entirely successful.

European-Native American relations throughout the nineteenth century. Frank's story offers a good deal of insight into the various conflicts and increasing tensions that ended with forced Indian removal.

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Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor. By Evelyn Nakano Glenn. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. Pp. 320. \$49.95)

Evelyn Nakano Glenn's *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* acts primarily as a synthesis of secondary literature on the inequality struggles of African Americans in the South, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and the Japanese in Hawaii, and a reformulation of how those inequalities gained meaning and interpretation in the decades surrounding the inception of the twentieth century. Glenn argues that race and gender, necessarily linked through their status as measuring sticks of inferiority, retained their primacy in the white male mind through manipulation of the definitions of proper citizenship and worthwhile endeavor. Citizenship and labor, however, should not be construed as definitions that gave rise to inequality, but instead as the language that gave voice to those definitions. Each, through its reciprocal bond with the other, created both a framework for exclusion and a tool of dissent toward the exclusionary societal sum. Citizenship, in this context, is not defined by the aggregate dictums of founding proclamations, court rulings, or legislative action. Rather, individual interpretation borrows from and leads to the social constructions of local regions, a notion not simply limited to public officials – racist or sexist assumptions embedded in understood community standards are the property of all in a given community.

The South was the most rigid and severe in the categorical defining-out of its black citizens. In a culture where black and white had lived side-by-side for so long, however, that defining-out required specific definitions of what it meant to be white. The "trend toward the one-drop rule" (143) made total purity of blood the sole standard of whiteness, thus further stigmatizing the black community. That purity, too, only exacerbated the white female ideal that allowed the white male power to check a supposed black male sexual aggression. This formulation would seem to rob African Americans of agency, but Glenn consistently describes white male actions as reactions to Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction assertiveness by the otherwise dispossessed minority.

Mexicans in the Southwest, too, found their freedom checked by "coercive labor practices" (188) and shifting definitions, but the lack of governmental or societal uniformity in reaction to these practices gave citizens and immigrants alike (slightly) more room to maneuver, though that room continued to shrink as the early twentieth century wore on. Whereas southern blacks were defined out as non-white inferiors and Mexicans and Mexican Americans were defined out as ethnically different and, therefore, inconsequential, the Japanese in Hawaii were branded inassimilable aliens who could never

develop national loyalty. In each of these cases, inferiority – however defined – became synonymous with femininity, thus perpetrating dual stereotypes that, Glenn emphasizes, have yet to be reconciled today.

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Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites, By J. Wayne Flynt. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xxiv, 214. \$19.95)

A new edition of Wayne Flynt's *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* has been recently reissued by Indiana University Press. Originally published in 1979, Flynt's worthy study examines the complex history of poor whites in the American South. Flynt both illustrates and carefully sorts through the various stereotypes that have been assigned to this frequently misunderstood cultural group in an attempt to uncover the realities of their existence. Central to Flynt's argument is his observation that even the scholars and social scientists who have attempted to understand the complicated history and culture of the South's poor white population have ultimately fallen into the trap of either blaming them for their dire economic situation or treating their plight in such a way that they seem to have no agency whatsoever. In refreshing contrast to either of these extremes, Flynt's line of reasoning allows that both environment and personal choice contribute to the poverty that historically has plagued this group. As Flynt himself states, "there is a place in this story both for social environment and human agency. *Dixie's Forgotten People* offers exhibits of class-based oppression of the poor, health problems of various kinds, the workings of abstract economic systems, and poor personal choices" (xxi). Indeed, Flynt focuses on all of these factors and more in his thorough survey of the causes, symptoms, and effects of poverty in the South.

One of the first issues that Flynt discusses is the difficulty of defining poor whites as a population group. This stems in part, he believes, from the fact that historians seldom have been able to understand or write from the point of view of the "common people" (1). It also derives, Flynt contends, "from the diverse way in which the phrase has been used. It has been applied to economic and social classes as well as to cultural and ethical values" (1). Even more difficult than determining what makes the South's poor whites a distinct group is deciding what constitutes poor white culture. As Flynt notes, many historians (Flynt cites the well-known British historian Arnold Toynbee as one example) have wrongly decided that poor whites have no culture and are "no better than barbarians" (15). Flynt explains that this "critical error of judgment" sprouts from the assumption that "material indigence found its equivalence in poverty of the spirit" (16).

In an attempt to correct and clarify this faulty mindset, Flynt addresses at length the varied components of poor white culture. Specific to this group is something Flynt refers to as an "ethic of repair or mend" (16). This mentality influenced the way poor whites produced folk crafts – scraps of cloth and other leftover materials were regularly used in their construction – and even shaped the architecture so commonly found in poor white communities; as Flynt points out, the "characteristic architecture" of the South was "the lowly cabin and dogtrot house," two designs which rely upon available materials and the "ingenuity of common people who built homes with little money" (16). Flynt also considers how southern poor whites maintained a culture which fostered various forms of musical expression, such as folk music, spirituals, and fasola music (also known as