

*Looking Back and Pressing Forward: Lessons for Today  
Found in the Story of Barbara Smith Conrad*

ASHLEY N. STONE, PHD  
*Syracuse University*

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## Looking Back and Pressing Forward: Lessons for Today Found in the Story of Barbara Smith Conrad

ASHLEY N. STONE, PHD  
*Syracuse University*

In 1956, two years after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Barbara Smith Conrad, a Black student in the first racially integrated class at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), was removed from her role as the lead in the opera *Dido and Aeneas* (Goldstone, 2006). This event was prompted by a member of the Texas Legislature from rural Northeast Texas, where Barbara Smith Conrad grew up. This legislator believed a Black woman should not play the love interest of a White man. This historical case study serves as a snapshot of the ways that the rural communities of Northeast Texas impacted the integration of education more broadly and slowed its progress in Texas ("Pittsburg Negro Ousted," 1957). It can also be seen as a microcosm of the impact of government officials and policy on individuals as well as larger populations and the role of college students in resisting discrimination and pursuing social justice. Viewed through a critical race lens, this study sought to amplify counter-narratives to the original media presentations of the story and provide an opportunity for current stakeholders in higher education to look to the past for guidance as they consider contemporary issues of race and politics in society and on university campuses. As the United States continues its transition to the administration elected in 2016 and new light is shed on racial tensions, it is important to take a moment to look back and see what lessons can be learned from history.

### Positionality

Growing up in rural Northeast Texas I never heard the story of Barbara Smith Conrad. I had also never heard about the important role that Center Point, the community Conrad grew up in (a community less than 15 minutes from my own home) played in Black schooling in Texas. When I first heard these stories after my arrival on the UT Austin campus, they served as yet another reminder of how communities of color can be erased from rural narratives and offered an opportunity to counteract that trend. Furthermore, as someone who studies students from rural communities, I appreciated that the story highlighted both the power and diversity that can lie within these spaces.

The day after the 2016 presidential election, I found myself at the annual conference for the Association for the Study of Higher Education surrounded by newly invigorated conversations that concerned rural communities and the students who came from them. The returns showed that rural communities had the ability to decide elections, and as a result, policy from the local to the national level. Suddenly there was a renewed concern for how higher education interacted with these spaces. At the same time people were sharing stories of acts of hate and violence against people of color, as well as those who were, or were perceived to be, Muslim or identified as lesbian, gay, trans\*, or queer. While these events of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia were not new, the stories seemed to pour in at a faster rate than many of us had experienced before.

It was in this context that I continued to examine the narrative of Barbara Smith Conrad and noted the many connections the story had to the current struggles being faced in higher education. Her story revealed the political power rural communities held in the 1950s, in addition to the racial tensions found on the UT Austin campus and in the United States' society more broadly. In her story, we find that rural communities in Northeast Texas were able to halt the progress of integration across the state and attempted to silence Conrad herself. Furthermore, it highlighted the ways stu-

dents at UT Austin resisted the efforts both to remove Barbara Smith Conrad from her role in the opera and to halt integration on the campus.

With this in mind, I begin by presenting a brief literature review focused on the history of integration and student activism in the United States as well as information concerning rural communities in Texas to contextualize the overall study. I then discuss critical race theory (CRT) in greater detail and explain how it informed the data collection, analysis, and implications of this study. Next, I share the story of Barbara Smith Conrad and then discuss it within the broader context of the UT Austin campus and integration across Texas. Finally, I conclude by examining how lessons learned through Conrad's story and understanding the impact of student activism in integration more broadly could help contemporary stakeholders in higher education consider the role of their students in shaping campus climate and addressing racism and other systems of oppression that continue to plague higher education. This historical analysis can also shed light on the ways in which students can influence policy, not only on their physical campus, but also within society more broadly. Most importantly for the future, this analysis demonstrates the capacity of students to impact racial equity through participation in community organizations and the capacity of institutions to better engage with rural communities and tap into the political power that exists in these spaces.

### Literature Review

This literature review examines the history of integration and student activism in order to provide greater understanding of the time period in which the story of Barbara Smith Conrad occurred and the role of student activism in creating change on campus. The overview also highlights continued issues surrounding race on college campuses beyond integration to begin drawing connections to contemporary contexts and aid in comparing and contrasting the historical case study with the current issues of oppression still embedded in higher education in the United States.

### Integration

The tensions felt throughout the racial integration of education in the United States continue to reverberate through the country today. More than sixty years after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, demographics show pockets where our systems of education are still segregated and in many ways unequal. Orfield, Kuscera, and Siegel-Hawley (2012) highlight what they call “double segregation” with students not only being segregated by race, but also by income level. The result of this double segregation means that the average Black<sup>1</sup> or Latinx<sup>2</sup> student attends a school with nearly twice the percentage of low-income students as the average Asian American or White student (Orfield et al., 2012). While the levels of segregation have not reversed to those that existed prior to the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, much of the growth gained through desegregation plans implemented after 1967 has been lost (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014). A great deal of this regression has occurred since the early 1990s when a Supreme Court ruling in *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v Dowell* authorized the termination of desegregation plans in Oklahoma City (Orfield et al., 2012). Furthermore, this re-segregation within schools has occurred despite declines in residential segregation—segregation based on where people live.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars quoted throughout this article do not capitalize “black” or “white” in their work and when quoting them directly I honor the capitalization of the original work. In my own writing throughout the article I capitalize both “Black” and “White” in accordance with current APA guidelines.

<sup>2</sup> Because the terms Latino and Latina are gendered, I use Latinx as a gender-neutral alternative, unless speaking about an individual or group that identifies explicitly as Latina or Latino. This is also why I use the term Chicax.

The road to integration spanned at least two decades, many court cases, and an entire nation; however, some of the most critical moments in this journey have occurred at UT Austin. The first major turning point occurred when the constitutionality of the separate-but-equal standard set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* was initially challenged (Shabazz, 2004). In 1946, Heman Sweatt attempted to enter The University of Texas Law School and was denied solely on the basis of his race (Lavergne, 2012). At the time Texas did not have a law school for Black students and so the state worked to set up a separate school for Black students to attend. The courts declared that the makeshift school was not “substantially equal” to that offered at UT Austin, and introduced the consideration of “intangibles” to the evaluation of school equality (Lavergne, 2012). While this court decision made the doctrine of separate-but-equal almost unattainable, it stopped short of declaring segregation unconstitutional. This “provided the context for the transition from a legal strategy centered on separate-but-equal schools to a frontal assault on the legitimacy of racially segregated education as such” (Shabazz, 2004, p. 34). While this decision integrated the law school at UT Austin, the first racially integrated undergraduate class would not arrive on campus for another 11 years, in 1956.

The Supreme Court’s first ruling in the *Brown v Board of Education* case finally made segregation in education unconstitutional (Lucas, 2006). A year later the second *Brown v Board of Education* decision declared that public schools must integrate with “all deliberate speed,” an ambiguous timeframe that ultimately meant change would come at a slow pace in Texas (Shabazz, 2004). The implementation would be a hard-fought struggle, just as the journey up until this point had been. Rhoads, Saenz, and Carducci (2005) discuss affirmative action as the next phase of this struggle as institutions of higher education continue to strive to build more diverse campus communities. It was through the *Fisher v The University of Texas at Austin* (2013, 2016) cases that this struggle returned to UT Austin.

### **Student Activism & Issues of Race**

In the 1940s college students in the United States played an active role in the fight for desegregation (Boren, 2001). The Congress of Racial Equity (CORE) was formed in 1942 and worked to protest racial injustice in nonviolent ways. In the 1950s the Student League for Industrial Democracy helped to link CORE to other student organizations, growing its membership and helping it to become a force in the civil rights movement. Students also played a role in the fight to desegregate universities, forcing Washington University in St. Louis to “integrate its medical school and school of social work in 1946-47” (Boren, 2001, p. 115) and the University of Washington to fully integrate in 1952.

In the 1960s college students took an active role in integrating spaces beyond university campuses, including the famous sit-in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro by four students from North Carolina A&T (Rhoads, 2016). Student activists also played a prominent role in the Freedom Rides of 1961, where 300 people made the journey through six southeastern states to challenge segregated interstate transportation and fought against the intense suppression of Black voter registration (Flowers, 1998; McAdam, 2015; Rhoads, 2016). It is important to note that a part of this voter registration campaign did focus on rural communities in the South (Flowers, 1998); however, there is little evidence of these efforts within the newspapers of rural Northeast Texas.

Furthermore, it was two college students who began the Black Panther Party and in turn impacted college campuses through the development of Black Student Unions and Black Studies programs (Rhoads, 2016). McAdam (2015) highlights the integral role of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), particularly during Freedom Summer in 1964, by “setting in motion one of the most dramatic chapters in the civil rights struggle” (p. 491). While President Johnson sought a “cooling off” period, SNCC pressed forward with their campaign. The end of the 1960s

also saw the Chicana student movement and the East Los Angeles School Blowouts in which thousands of mostly Chicana students protested against the inferior quality of the education they were being provided (Delgado Bernal, 1998). On college campuses Chicana and Asian American students also worked to create ethnic studies programs that would help combat the hidden curriculum of universities, which often served as a tool of assimilation for students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Soldatenko, 2001).

Issues concerning race continued to fuel student activism beyond the fight for integration. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, students came together in support of affirmative action with many joining the work of the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action and Integration and Immigration Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN). The organization was originally formed at the University of California Berkeley in 1995 and began gaining strength at the University of Michigan in the wake of the *Gratz v Bollinger* and *Grutter v Bollinger* cases (Rhoads, Saenz, & Carducci, 2005). However, not all student action has been supportive of these efforts and there continue to be student organizations that speak out against affirmative action (Lewis, 2016; Rhoads et al., 2005).

Looking across the history of activism by college students around issues of race, we can see that they played a role in establishing their own organizations that fought for racial equality not only on campuses but also for society as a whole. The students fought for integration on their campuses and the desegregation of public spaces beyond the boundaries of their campus. While this activism has been and continues to be focused on college campuses and their surrounding communities, it may be worthwhile for students to consider how their work could move to rural areas and leverage the political power found in these spaces to create greater change.

## The Rural Context

As a result of our urban-centric society, rural areas are often understood only in relation to urban spaces (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). These rural communities are typically characterized as small and isolated from urban life (Atkin, 2003) and have land-based economies connected to agriculture, mining, or timber (Atkin, 2003; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2011; Howley & Howley, 2010). Furthermore, though these communities are often considered to have conservative values, this does not mean that they are solely Republican. For example, predominantly Latinx rural communities along the border in Texas often vote for the Democratic Party, as do many predominantly Black communities in the rural South (Politico, 2016). These results align with findings from national returns disaggregated by race (Tyson & Maniam, 2016).

Rural communities are also often assumed to be monolithic with predominantly White populations (Carr, Lichter, & Kefalas, 2012); however, these communities are becoming increasingly racially diverse. In fact, the largest proportion of population growth within rural communities over the past decade has come from the Latinx population. Currently within Texas, the majority of rural K-12 students are Latinx with the largest populations of rural Latinx students living in South and West Texas (Texas A&M, 2014). The largest proportion of Black rural students can be found in Northeast Texas, which is not surprising considering in the 1960s, one of only three predominantly Black communities in Texas was Marion County, adjacent to the county that was home to Barbara Smith Conrad (Social Explorer, 2014). Though many rural communities across the United States are predominantly White, it is important to acknowledge the racial diversity that exists in these spaces so that people of color are not erased from them and the complexity of their political power is better understood. With this in mind, I chose to use critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework for this study.

## Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory emerged in the mid-1970s through the work of Derek Bell and Alan Freeman, “both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000, p. xvi). Legal scholars who have helped advance CRT (including Derek Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic) examine the ways in which legal doctrine oppresses people of color and work to eliminate these racially oppressive doctrines from the legal system (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000, 2001; Matsuda, 1991; Solórzano, 1997).

In the introduction to the second edition of their book *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, Delgado and Stefanic (2000) highlight three premises that undergird CRT: First, racism is so deeply entrenched within American society that it appears to be a normal part of culture. Second, storytelling, particularly counter-narratives, plays an important role in creating a new and different social reality that is more equitable. Finally, they highlight the concept of interest convergence developed by Derek Bell, which claims, “white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest” (p. xvii). While CRT began in the legal field, its tenets are applicable in other areas including education.

Scholars such as Adrienne Dixon and Celia Rousseau (2006), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), Daniel Solórzano (1997), and William Tate (1997) have acknowledged the need to disrupt the systemic racism embedded within education and have helped bring CRT into the field. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) focus on three ways that aspects of CRT can be used to understand the inequity that continues to permeate education. This includes “racism as endemic and ingrained American life,” “a reinterpretation of ineffective civil rights law,” and “challenging claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy” (pp. 18-20).

In his work, “Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education,” Solórzano (1997) examines “the linkages between an emerging theoretical framework in the law – critical race theory – and its relation and application to the concepts of race, racism, and racial stereotyping in teacher education” (p. 5). Solórzano highlights five tenets of CRT that include: the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and an interdisciplinary perspective.

The first tenet of CRT highlighted by Solórzano (1997) is the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, which acknowledges that “race and racism are endemic, permanent” and that race intersects with other forms of privilege and oppression in people’s lives (p. 6). Second, CRT challenges hegemonic ideas that disguise racism and oppression. While this began with claims in the legal system, it has been translated into other fields such as education (Solórzano, 1997). The third tenet of CRT is its commitment to social justice and a belief that working toward the elimination of racial oppression is part of a larger project to end all forms of oppression. Fourth, CRT centers experiential knowledge as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding” (Solórzano, 1997, p. 7). This tenet honors the stories, voices, and experiences of those who have been oppressed as not only important but also central to understanding and working against oppression. Finally, CRT calls upon a variety of disciplines in order to contextualize issues of race and racism in order to more effectively eliminate them, once again as a part of the broader goal to eliminate other forms of oppression such as those based on gender, sexual orientation, or class. CRT was integral to this study because it allowed me to center the experiential knowledge of Barbara Smith Conrad and to acknowledge the racism embedded in media sources that initially presented this story. In addition, it requires that connections be drawn from this work to contemporary contexts in an effort to effectively dismantle racism, and as a result, other forms of oppression.

## Methodology

A case study methodology allowed me to examine “a bounded system, bounded by time and place” (Creswell, p. 97). The bounded system was the story of Barbara Smith Conrad, which served as an instrumental case revealing the direct impact of the political fight over integration in Texas on a single young woman. This case helped illustrate consequences of a larger societal movement and in turn allows current stakeholders in education an opportunity to examine the past and consider implications for meeting their current needs.

The case study approach also informed the choice to collect multiple forms of data to construct a more holistic understanding of the case. In this study, I utilized a variety of primary and secondary historical data sources to gain a more thorough picture of Barbara Smith Conrad, the events that unfolded in Austin, and how they represented the broader struggle against integration from rural Northeast Texas and the fight for integration from students on the UT Austin campus. The primary source I pulled from in the telling of this story was an interview with Conrad that was conducted in 2006 as part of the Shirley Bird Perry University of Texas Oral History Project. This was one of the first opportunities to allow CRT to inform the choices I made about the data to be collected for this study and how it was used. The selection of this interview and relying on Conrad’s telling of the story supported the fourth theme of CRT, honoring the centrality of experiential knowledge.

Because rural communities can often be forgotten, and their stories untold, I relied heavily on articles from the 1950s that appeared in the newspapers from rural Northeast Texas communities to reconstruct the context of the case. I focused on newspapers from communities tied to Barbara Smith Conrad and Joe Chapman, the legislator primarily responsible for her removal from the opera. For each newspaper, I looked through the issues in the weeks leading up to and following the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, the weeks following the removal of Conrad from the opera, and the weeks leading up to each of Chapman’s elections.

I also searched for articles from across the United States to understand how the rest of the country viewed and responded to these events. Additional primary and secondary sources, including digital archives from the Texas legislature and books focused on the history of integration in Texas and at UT Austin, were utilized to provide deeper context for the newspaper articles and to compare and contrast different accounts of the events. One example is the contrast between the newspaper reporting concerning the communities’ responses to integration versus Shabazz’s (2004) accounts of violence.

An important limitation to acknowledge concerning the data collected for this study is that no local African American Newspapers in the Austin area or Northeast Texas during this time period could be found. As an additional measure to intentionally center counter-narratives within this case study, I conducted a search of the African American Newspapers Series 1, 1827 through 1998. The closest African American paper that could be accessed through the database during the time of these events was the *Arkansas State Press* in Little Rock, Arkansas. It ran a single article about the Barbara Smith Conrad story, “Texas bias kills Negro’s opera role” (1957). The only other African American paper in the collection to run an article about this incident was in the *Milwaukee Defender* (“Texas Solons,” 1957). This search was a way to challenge the dominant narratives found through the mainstream news outlets and was driven by the second tenet of CRT, which seeks to challenge dominant ideologies. Despite this targeted search, there were few results found connected to the study, which serves as a limitation to the work.

Furthermore, as the first tenet of CRT states, racism is embedded within American culture. Therefore, the same power structures at work in the legislature and system of education would also be at work in American media. It is particularly vital to acknowledge this since a substantial amount

of the data for this study was pulled from newspapers. Once again, I worked to use the first-hand accounts from Barbara Smith Conrad to help counteract this issue and compensate for the limitation of African American run media sources from the time and geographic space of this case study.

Critical race theory also drove my analysis of the data in a number of ways. First, I center the first-hand narrative from Barbara Smith Conrad as a way to honor her experiential knowledge and her own telling of the story over the media's. Next, I focused my analysis on two main issues: 1) identifying sources and systems of power and their impact on racial privilege and oppression and 2) finding places of contradiction among the data sources in order to highlight counter-narratives. Finally, I sought to find parallels between these findings and current racial tensions and activism on college campuses in an effort to identify transferable lessons for those continuing to resist racism and other systems of oppression embedded in society and education. This final step is crucial to CRT, as it helps create practical ways for research to be translated in to action that promotes social justice, which is part of the third tenet.

## Findings

Because this work centers on the experience of Barbara Smith Conrad, I begin with her personal narrative relying heavily on an interview conducted as part of The University of Texas Oral History Project. I then present the broader narrative of integration within Texas. Finally, I present themes that emerged as I drew connections between Conrad's experience and the broader fight for integration.

### Barbara Smith Conrad

Barbara Smith Conrad was raised in Center Point, Texas - a small community in Northeast Texas founded by five freed men, one of which was Conrad's great grandfather. Conrad described Center Point as "a community of music makers" (Conrad, 2006, p. 7). She was the daughter of two teachers and education also played an important role in her community. Center Point was home to the first accredited Black school in Texas, a boarding school that later consolidated with the school in Queen City when Conrad was in the eighth grade (Conrad, 2006).

While Barbara Smith Conrad (2006) painted a beautiful picture of the Center Point community, she also recognized the racial tension that made up the broader landscape of rural Northeast Texas. She remembered her mother ordering clothes from a White dressmaker in Queen City and having to go to the back door to pay for and receive them. She remembered violence as well. She recalled watching the dead body of a Black man she knew personally be dragged from a lake and learning that he had been killed because he allegedly made a pass at a White lady.

Upon graduation from high school, Conrad enrolled at Prairie View A&M, as many in her family had done before (Conrad, 2006). However, in her first year she was recruited to enter the music program at UT Austin and accepted the invitation to become a member of their first racially integrated undergraduate class (Briscoe Center for American History, n.d.). She recounted her first moments on campus in the interview:

As we were walking toward the Main Building, towards the Tower Building, there was some jeering. Very little, but it's the one sentence that I wish I could erase from my memory. Some boy screamed out, "Oh, look at them. Our pappies probably messed around with all of their grand-mammies, their mammies," or something like that. My heart stopped and the fury I felt - I have a classmate who said, "You turned purple." We had been drilled to stay silent, to stay dignified, and ignore anything like that. It was the only incident - but aside from that



it was the same excitement, and anxiety, and all the things that any youngster feels. (Conrad, 2006, p. 13)

While Conrad recalled this moment of overt racism as she first got to campus, she also shared that she felt welcomed in the music school and talked about the housemothers and ladies in the community that cared for her and the other young Black students (Conrad, 2006).

In her first semester, Barbara Smith Conrad earned the lead role of Dido, in the opera *Dido and Aeneas* (Goldstone, 2006). The opera was to be performed during the spring of 1957 and Conrad's co-star was a young White man, which was seen as unacceptable by Joe Chapman. The state legislator reached out to the president of UT-Austin, Logan Wilson, and informed him that:

Any Negro student is entitled to the same training as far as training is concerned. But I don't think that from a point of public relations that it is smart to create a controversy of this type by putting a Negro in a role as a heroine where the script for the opera calls for a white person. ("Chapman Wins Point," 1957)

While Chapman claimed that Black students should have access to the same training as White students, he did not believe that they were entitled to the same opportunities. In the end, Barbara Smith Conrad believed that it was this pressure from Joe Chapman that led to her removal from the role of Dido. It is important to note that in this article, "Chapman wins point in fight about Negro girl" (1957), that though Barbara Smith Conrad is quoted and her name is eventually used in the article, the headline only uses the legislator's name and the article is focused on his "win" rather than what was taken from Conrad. This highlights why it is necessary to be critical of the media sources available to construct historical cases and the importance of having Barbara Smith Conrad's first-hand account to draw upon in this study and reemphasizes the importance of the first and fourth tenets of CRT presented by Solórzano (1997). These tenets, the centrality of racism and the validity of experiential knowledge, require that scholars to interrogate how racism - which could be conscious or unconscious both at the level of the individual author and at the larger institutional level of the paper or media - could be influencing the ways history has been recorded and to seek out counter-narratives from people of color to combat misrepresentations and present differing viewpoints.

Dr. E. William Doty, Dean for the College of Fine Arts at UT-Austin, was the one to deliver the news to Conrad that she was being removed from the opera (Conrad, 2006; "E. William Doty," 2013). She was told that this was the result of a conversation between the Board of Regents, president, housemothers, and other interested citizens who met to discuss the issue and felt that for her own safety she should no longer continue in the role. Conrad was skeptical of this reasoning from the beginning and said that while she had encountered men who had tried to scare her, none ever did much damage. As she recalled her emotions on the day she was told she would no longer be allowed to play the role, she remembered:

I was beyond heartbroken. I lived in a place of heartbreak and rage. Rage at a system that could let that happen with a man I absolutely adored. I loved Dean Doty. I really did. I had to listen to him tell me those things, which we both knew were not true. (Conrad, 2006, p. 21)

Here, Conrad reveals that she not only felt the loss of a leading role she had rightfully earned but also betrayal from an administrator she deeply admired. Furthermore, she shared that she never met President Wilson, or knew the whole truth about how she was removed from the role, but did have a strong suspicion concerning what transpired saying, "I will never know the truth. I think the truth was in the hands of Joe Chapman" (Conrad, 2006, p. 26).

Though this representative from her home in Northeast Texas was a catalyst for her role being taken away, Barbara Smith Conrad would not be hidden away in the shadows. She told reporters from the Associated Press that she would attend the opera and support her cast mates, and, in turn, many others supported her ("Pittsburg Negro Ousted," 1957). Conrad received hundreds of letters,

all but one of which were supportive (Conrad, 2006). Some of those letters of support even came from other members of the Texas Legislature.

Students and faculty at UT Austin also worked to support Barbara Smith Conrad on campus. She remembered students all over campus telling reporters that they were “Barbara Smith,” in order to divert attention away from her, to give her some peace (Conrad, 2006). *The Pittsburg Gazette* reported Chapman saying that the whole incident would have passed by quietly if “left wing students” and faculty had not “raised hell” (“Pittsburg Negro Ousted,” 1957). Though the actions of students in this situation were not enough to restore Conrad to her role in the opera, they did play a part in creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for her on campus. Furthermore, the student and faculty resistance to Barbara Smith Conrad’s removal was strong enough to agitate Chapman and to garner national attention. The most notable support for Conrad came from Harry Belafonte, who himself faced racist backlash for appearing as the love interest to a White woman in a film during the same year (“Belafonte Admits,” 1957; “Racists seek ban,” 1957). Belafonte offered to pay Barbara Smith Conrad’s way to any other school in the nation so that she could leave the university. Ultimately, Conrad chose to stay at UT Austin.

Despite the first role she was ever awarded in an opera being taken away from her, Barbara Smith Conrad’s star continued to shine. She had a successful career as an opera singer in New York City and around the world (Briscoe Center for American History, n.d.). In 1985, the Texas Ex-Student’s Association recognized Conrad as a Distinguished Alumnus and in 1986 UT Austin honored her by creating the Barbara Smith Conrad Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Fine Arts (Briscoe Center for American History, n.d.; The University of Texas at Austin, 2010). The 81st Texas Legislature also honored her in 2009 through House Concurrent Resolution 31.

## The Broader Context

The story of Barbara Smith Conrad is a strong reminder that political oppression does not only seek out general populations of people but that political actors can also take action against individuals to make their point. In the same way, individual actions from students helped to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for a single student, while broader more organized student activism helped to transform the policies of a university and contribute to integration efforts across the nation. In this section I discuss the larger context of integration in Texas. I examine the governmental action taken at the individual and policy level, the student action taken at the individual and collective level, and the engagement between higher education and rural communities.

While not all representatives in the Texas Legislature opposed integration, there was a substantial enough segment in which bills were passed to slow the progress of integration in the state (“Texas Curbs Near,” 1957). This segregationist bloc was led by Joe Chapman (“Chapman Wins Point,” 1957), who “called for all lawful means to promote states’ rights and prevent integration in Southern schools” (Handbook of Texas Online, 2010, para. 1). Shabazz (2004) shares that, “[i]n immediate response to *Brown v Board of Education*, Texas commissioner of education J.W. Edgar instructed the public schools of the state to make no attempt at changing their policies of racial separatism and hierarchy” (p. 142). This sentiment echoed through the local newspapers of Northeast Texas.

In May of 1954 these local papers reported that people were “quietly” accepting the Supreme Court’s unanimous decision that declared segregation as unconstitutional (“Court’s Ruling,” 1954) and that Texas was taking a “calm view” about the issue (“Texas Takes Calm View,” 1954). The articles reveal that people were already expecting the decision and so they were not surprised (“Court’s Ruling,” 1954; “Texas Takes Calm View,” 1954). The newspapers also stress that changes would not begin immediately and it could take several years before a process was in place to begin

the integration of schools (“Court’s Ruling,” 1954; “Nation’s Supreme Court Rules,” 1954; “Texas Takes Calm View,” 1954). This mild reaction appears to have been because people assumed there would be no actual change, at least not for a while, just as Shabazz (2004) suggested.

The following week, the tone in the papers expressed slightly more concern. *The Winnsboro News* printed an article entitled “Segregation Decision Poses Local Problems.” While the article never mentions any specific problems, it does reiterate that no immediate changes should be made in the schools (“Segregation Decision,” 1954). *The Pittsburg Gazette* featured an article about a southern strategy to privatize education in an effort to avoid integration (“Southern States,” 1954). Southern states were looking to close down their public schools and open private schools that could remain segregated.

Though Shabazz (2004) acknowledges this strategy of quiet resistance put forward by the local newspapers in the immediate wake of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, he also presents the more violent aspects of the efforts to combat integration. He shares:

Gregg County, one of East Texas’s most racist regions, gave birth to a wave of repression in the 1950s that matched the savage days following the emancipation of blacks from slavery.... The *Texas Observer* helped expose the rash of violent attacks, and Tom Sutherland, director of the Texas Commission on Race Relations (TCRR), called upon East Texas pastors and newspaper editors to promote peaceful race relations, but the attacks continued unabated. (Shabazz, 2004, p. 145)

This violence included shootings at Black schools and homes in Gregg County and an attack on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) office in Sulphur Springs, where Joe Chapman was from. It is important to understand that while the narratives from newspapers highlighted non-violent resistance to integration, Black people in the area were facing continuous acts of violence (Shabazz, 2004).

Newspapers also seemed intentional about reporting the concerns from the administrators of Black schools in the area. These leaders spoke about their students not feeling ready to be fully integrated and potential for them to feel abused as the minority on the integrated campuses (“Courts Ruling,” 1954; “Negro Principal Doubts,” 1954). They also spoke about the concern of Black administrators and teachers losing their jobs because of White school board members being unwilling to hire them. While these were concerns voiced by the principal of a local Black school, it is once again as a part of CRT it is important to acknowledge the ways that institutional structures silenced Black communities leaving them unable to control the narratives presented through local media.

In 1957, following a filibuster by Senator Henry B. Gonzalez that lasted more than 20 hours, and a second by Senator Abraham Kazen which lasted more than three hours, the Texas Senate passed two special session bills. The first bill required “the Governor to close any public school faced with a threat of violence that could be prevented otherwise only by the use of military forces” (“Texas Curbs Near,” 1957). The second bill granted \$50,000 to the State Attorney General to fight lawsuits that were brought against school districts “challenging the constitutionality of state laws designed to preserve segregation in schools” (“Texas Curbs Near,” 1957). These political actions represent the power that the state legislative branch had over the issue of integration; however, the federal judicial branch eventually intervened. In the late summer of 1970, the federal government finally initiated court action against Texas school districts that had still not created plans for desegregation (“Texas Gets Deadline,” 1970).

Still, not everyone in Texas was opposed to integration. In addition to work being done by the NAACP, student activists also moved the cause forward. While CORE and SNCC fought for civil rights across the United States, students at UT Austin also began taking a nonviolent stand (Boren, 2006; “Texas Students Back Integration,” 1958). In 1958 the Student Assembly at UT Austin moved to ask all of the businesses near campus to integrate (“Texas Students Back Integration,”

1958), and in 1961 students and faculty demanded greater integration on the campus itself (“Texas U. Delaying Integration Move,” 1961). This means that five years after the arrival of the first racially integrated undergraduate class at UT Austin, the campus was finally moving toward full integration (Goldstone, 2006).

## Emergent Themes

**Individual and collective impact.** While the citizens of rural Northeast Texas were resisting the integration of their K-12 schools through passive inaction, the charge to resist integration within the state legislature was also being led by an individual from rural Northeast Texas, Joe Chapman. While he continued to lead the resistance to statewide integration through his position in the legislature, he also leveraged his political power to push for the opera at UT Austin to remain segregated. He sought the removal of a single student, Barbara Smith Conrad, from the role she had earned simply because of her race. Understanding this connection highlights both the individual impact of the political resistance to integration, as well as the impact on the collective population.

**Individual and collective action.** In the same way that political action was taken against Barbara Smith Conrad as an individual and against school integration more broadly across the state, student action was seen both at the individual level and at the collective level. Though the actions of the students at UT Austin were not enough to cause the university to return Conrad to the role of Dido, their continued activism concerning the advancement of integration on campus was eventually successful in 1964 when the residence halls were finally desegregated (Goldstone, 2006).

Individual students were able to take actions to support Conrad and help her feel welcomed on campus, but it took collective and persistent action to create real change within the university. Zooming out further to the role of student activism in issues of integration beyond college campuses at the national level, students’ success came from joining forces with community organizations beyond the campus boundaries. Once again, organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) joined larger movements such as the Freedom Rides in order to create change in national policies, not just the policies on their own campuses (Boren, 2006).

**Inaction in rural areas.** Finally, it is critical to highlight the “inaction” in rural areas, which presented itself in two distinct ways through the research. First, it is important to address the blatant inaction of the people of rural Northeast Texas. While violent acts of racism were ever present during the time of integration, the most consistent narrative present within the media was that of passive acceptance of the Supreme Court decision and inaction as the primary form of resistance to integration. It is important to expose this inaction as an active choice to oppose and obstruct integration (Shabazz, 2004). This inaction continued to prop up inequity in schools that existed as the result of policies rooted in racism and brings to the forefront yet another area that scholars using CRT must interrogate in an effort to uncover the centrality of race and racism (Solórzano, 1007).

It is also important to note that while the students of UT Austin actively fought for greater integration on and around campus, there was little evidence of activism within the rural communities of Northeast Texas where some of the greatest opposition to integration was occurring. The primary opposition to Barbara Smith Conrad was pushed by the representative from Northeast Texas and some of the most virulent opposition to integration, both violent and non-violent, active and inactive, came from the same area. This absence of activism within rural spaces could serve as a valuable lesson for current student activists as they seek new ways to resist systemic racism and other forms of oppression.

## Discussion and Implications

The themes that emerged throughout this study can provide a helpful framework for understanding the continued systemic racial oppression experienced by students today and efforts to combat this oppression. In this section, I will begin by presenting some of the current struggles against systemic oppression being faced by colleges and universities. Then, I will connect the emergent themes from this study to that contemporary context and discuss the practical implications these findings can have on practice and policy within higher education and beyond college and university campuses. This intentional connection to practice reflects one of the most vital components of CRT, which calls for the dismantling of racism as an integral step in dismantling all forms of oppression.

### Contemporary Context

As previously mentioned, affirmative action has been one part of the continued struggle for racial equity in education and is a cause that has continued to be taken up by student activists in our current context (Rhoads et al., 2005). Sixty years after the first Black students entered UT Austin, racial tensions continue to impact the campus and other college and university campuses across the nation. In June of 2016, the Supreme Court held that “the race-conscious admissions program in use at the time of [Fisher’s] application is lawful under the Equal Protection Clause” (*Fisher v. University of Texas*, 2016, p. 1).

Four months later, the Young Conservatives of Texas held an “affirmative action bake sale” on the UT Austin campus to demonstrate their opposition to affirmative action policies. The organization sold baked goods on a tiered pricing system charging each person based on their race and gender (Lewis, 2016). While the group held a similar event after the 2013 *Fisher* ruling, the 2016 event was met with hundreds of students swarming the bake sale table in protest. In addition to the protest, student organizations such as, the Black Student Alliance, Students for Equality and Diversity, and the University Democrats organized an event the following Monday to “address confusion” about what affirmative action is and provide a more organized forum for discussion (Cobler, 2016, para. 2).

This protest is just one example of recent student activism addressing racial issues on the UT Austin campus. During the summer of 2015, UT Austin students revitalized efforts to remove statues on campus honoring Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the Confederacy (Goyette, 2015; Svoskos, 2015). The president and vice president of the student body had run on a platform that included the removal of the statues and filed a resolution for their removal even before they were elected. In addition to passing the resolution, the two student body leaders also initiated a petition for the removal. Statues of Jefferson Davis and Woodrow Wilson were removed that summer<sup>3</sup> (Haurwitz, 2015). Dr. Gregory Vincent, Vice President for the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at UT Austin at the time, credited removal of the statues to the power of the student leadership.

These examples highlight the continued issues of racial tension on campus but also the ability of collective and continuous student action to generate direct physical change on campus and their ability to open up space for dialogue that can hopefully impact campus racial climate. The work of these students ran parallel to student activism around racial issues across the nation. The persistent protests of the student organization Concerned Student 1950 at the University of Missouri led

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<sup>3</sup> The remaining statues were removed in the summer of 2017 following the violent protests in Charlottesville, Va. (Bromwich, 2017).

to the resignation of the President of the university system and Chancellor of the flagship campus in Columbia (Pearson, 2015). Support for Concerned Student 1950's work to combat racism spread beyond its own campus to institutions such as Yale University, Ithaca College, and Smith College, where students held protests both in solidarity with the students at the University of Missouri and to address issues of race on their own campuses (Fares & Moon, 2015).

On the other side of the United States at Claremont McKenna College, the Dean of Students stepped down as a result of student protests concerning incidents of racial bias (Watanabe & Rivera, 2015). While many of these protests have focused on issues of racial injustice and inequality on their individual campuses, social media has allowed students to give visibility to their work beyond their own campus and find solidarity with students across the nation. With this revival of student activism on college and university campuses, students and administrators could look to the past to learn from those who have fought for racial equity and social justice and consider how new tools such as social media could be used to generate collaborations beyond the boundaries of campus and build capacity for social justice initiatives.

At the same time that campuses have seen increases in student activism, they have also seen increases in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim messages rooted in racial discrimination, as well as overt White supremacist propaganda and actions (Bien, 2017; Jaschik, 2017). UT Austin was among the many campuses to see fliers promoting these messages of hate posted around campus (Bien, 2017). In 2017, these fliers and messages came alongside executive orders and proposed policies from the new national administration, which directly impacted immigrant students, faculty, and staff members whether they are undocumented or not. These acts and messages reveal that issues of race on college campuses, and in society, go beyond race itself and sit at the intersections of race, citizenship status, and religion making the focus of intersectionality found within CRT a helpful framework for understanding the increasing complexity of these issues.

### **Connecting Past Lessons to Present Action**

Once again, these events highlight how systems of oppression intersect with one another and manifest on multiple levels within society. Therefore, the impact can be felt on both an individual and collective level and action can be taken at both the individual and collective level. This is an important point for stakeholders in higher education to consider as they seek to meet the needs of students in the face of continued and complex issues of oppression. In addition, while this action may begin on college campuses, it has the potential to create change in a societal context.

**Individual and collective impact.** Stakeholders in higher education should constantly be advocating for a more socially just colleges and universities as well as state and national policies on behalf of marginalized populations. At the same time, these stakeholders must also consider how to meet the more immediate needs of individuals on campuses being affected by the policies and pay attention to any direct action being taken against these students, faculty, or staff members. For example, institutions must consider how to support individual faculty, staff, and students who are citizens of countries affected by the travel ban that is currently being implemented by our national administration. College and university administrators should consider how individual faculty members might be targeted because of the research they are pursuing or how students might be targeted for being open about their immigration status or religious beliefs. Administrators must also consider how to protect these students on their campuses collectively and how to respond to any messages and actions that threaten the safety of these students.

Furthermore, campuses must be aware of, and responsive to, their campus climate. The racism that many of these anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim actions are rooted in, not only impact those students who identify as immigrants or Muslim, but also those students who are perceived to fall

within these categories. Finally, in addition to considering how their own campus policies impact undocumented students, stakeholders in higher education must create strategies to combat policies that disenfranchise or discriminate against their students, faculty, and staff at the state and federal level.

**Individual and collective action.** Just as it is important for faculty and staff members to understand how to respond to oppression at both an individual and systemic level, it is also important to help students understand how they can affect change on multiple levels. Students can look back on the rich history of student activism in the United States and learn from the critical role that college students across generations have played in the fight for justice and equity. At each level within the case study presented here, from the microcosm of Barbara Smith Conrad's story to the macrocosm of desegregation across the United States, there are practical lessons that students can translate into a contemporary context and use to organize more effectively whether they are seeking to provide support to individuals on their campus or create change in state or federal policy.

Students seeking social justice should consider how to create change at the individual, campus, state, and national level. While the media has provided evidence of students continuing to successfully advocate for change on their campuses, administrators in higher education should also be urging students to consider the one-on-one actions they can take to make sure that their peers feel safe on campus and how students might connect with community organizations to help impact state and national policies. This could include programing to all students that explains the rights of undocumented students could help shift the campus climate in a positive way for undocumented students and help the broader student body find concrete ways to support their undocumented peers. Another example could be to offer bystander intervention trainings that teach students strategies to effectively intervene when they see incidents of discrimination occurring on campus, just as individual students stepped in to support Barbara Smith Conrad. This could also mean connecting students with contemporary community organizations—analogue to CORE and SNCC—that are engaged in fighting discriminatory policies affecting immigrants and Muslims or that are inherently racist, sexist, xenophobic, or homophobic.

**Action in rural areas.** In addition to encouraging students to actively fight for social justice on a variety of levels, faculty and staff members can also help these students seek opportunities to create connections across a variety of spaces to increase the students' capacity to create social change. Within the historical context of this case this could have included finding opportunities both in those rural communities that opposed integration, but also rural communities of color that may have been more supportive of the students' goals. In this way, looking to the past allows scholars and practitioners a way to uncover potentially untapped opportunities for resisting oppression that can continue to be explored today.

As student activists strategize about how they will create change at the societal level, they should take into consideration the spaces in which they face the most opposition and where there might be untapped resources. Within the story of Barbara Smith Conrad and integration in Texas, these spaces were located in rural Northeast Texas. The greatest opposition to integration within the Texas legislature was from this area, and the people of the area used multiple forms of resistance to slow the progress of integration in their own communities, yet there seems to have been little organized opposition to Joe Chapman as a legislator or to the tactics being used by community members to delay desegregation. Articles and advertisements, or the lack thereof, leading up to each of Joe Chapman's elections imply that he was kept in office not by active campaigns and enthusiastic support, but by a lack of competition. Therefore, organized action within these communities could have helped quell the anti-integration efforts. Clearly, it is impossible to know if student activists could have engaged with these communities to defeat Joe Chapman or speed up the process of integration. Also, with the violence that was occurring toward people of color in these areas, there is no way to

know how dangerous it might have been for student activists to launch a campaign in these areas. Still, looking back, it could have been a missed opportunity that current students and other activists should consider, especially with renewed interest in the political power of rural communities in the wake of the 2016 presidential election.

It is also important to understand that not all rural communities have always or will always be opposed to the goals of student activists. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) highlighted the importance of Black rural communities as sites where oppositional knowledge can be created. From a critical race perspective, this means they could be an ideal place in which dominant ideologies could be challenged. Understanding this history of rural Northeast Texas, as well as the racial diversity across rural Texas today highlights the opportunity for politicians and political movements to capitalize on the power within these areas. Investment in these areas, including the cultivation of strong candidates for local and statewide election, could be a way for students committed to social justice to make an impact through shifting political ideologies or creating greater capacity for political activity among rural spaces that align with their values.

The stories of Barbara Smith Conrad and integration across the United States highlight the power of college students to create change in a variety of ways. Students can help shift the campus climate and create more inclusive spaces on their campuses. They can also have an impact on university policy through sustained collective action and on their surrounding communities, state, or national policy by collaborating with organizations beyond their campus. Finally, students committed to social justice should also consider rural communities as new spaces for pursuing their goals.

### Conclusion

While political discourse often seems focused on metropolitan areas, further examining the story of Barbara Smith Conrad revealed how rural communities had a real impact on the implementation of integration in Texas. Therefore, effective strategies for addressing issues of racial equity and social justice cannot be ignored within these communities. My own personal and scholarly background drew me to this study. However, my continued investigation revealed parallels between the activism of students during the integration of UT Austin in the 1950s and 1960s and the activism around racial issues that continue on campuses to this day. Encouraging students to create more inclusive campus environments and engage in social justice movements are not new or novel ideas; however, taking the time to look back at the past can remind us of the lasting impact of these actions and help us to identify potentially missed opportunities. Just as the *Brown v Board of Education* case was one milestone within the journey of integration, this case was only milestone on the continuing journey toward racial equity, a long road that is still being traveled through Texas and across the United States.

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**ASHLEY N. STONE, PHD**, is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Higher Education at Syracuse University. Her research takes a critical approach to examining the experiences of college and university students from rural communities. She also seeks to disrupt monolithic depictions of rurality by highlighting the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of rural communities that too often goes unrecognized.



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