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Shhhh! There's Resistance in Progress:

Examining African Americans' Methods of Resisting Segregation in Wade, North Carolina

In rural Wade, North Carolina, no hymn-singing, sign-toting masses marched anywhere. No well-dressed youths carried out sit-ins at the local lunch counter while suffering severe verbal and physical abuse. No TV cameras and reporters from national news media stations were anywhere to be seen. Fire hoses came out only for the literal fires that threatened to burn a building to the ground, not for any metaphorical ones that threatened to reduce the Southern system of segregation to ashes and memories. The thud of truncheons on peaceful protestors did not echo through the streets. However, the protestors were there. They were in the streets and in the stores and in the homes and in the fields and in practically every part of Wade. They were just hard to see, operating so indirectly, in fact, that many might not have known that they themselves were protestors. Due to the risks of open resistance, the African American residents of Wade challenged racist stereotypes and the system of segregation, both unconsciously and consciously, through indirect means.

Melton A. McLaurin makes the risks for an African American attempting to openly resist segregation in Wade very clear in his book, *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South*. He states, "For a black in Wade to have challenged openly and directly the segregationist regime would have been unthinkable, at least before the end of the decade. To express resentment openly, even in jest, could have proved fatal."¹ McLaurin substantiates this

¹ Melton A. McLaurin, *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 135.

claim by briefly relating an instance in which a white man was acquitted in court, despite having killed his wife and the African American man with which she was allegedly having an affair.²

McLaurin also describes a situation in which a white man threatened to kill an African American man who had insulted him in drunken jest.³ In addition to the threat of physical violence, African Americans would also, in all likelihood, have faced severe economic reprisals had they attempted to openly challenge the system of segregation in Wade. They could have been fired from their jobs and had their names black-balled by whites so that they would not be able to find work anywhere else in the area. Considering the fact that many of the African American families lived in severe poverty as it was, risking their lives and livelihoods was something most individuals and their families simply could not afford.

Given their inability to openly resist segregation, the African Americans of Wade had to find other, subtler ways to challenge the system, and, in their daily efforts to simply survive and live the best that they could, many African Americans ended up actually unknowingly finding just such ways. McLaurin relates many examples to the reader of people whose mere existences challenged his own beliefs about segregation and helped him to ultimately reject it. One such person was Betty Jo, an African American girl that he had a crush on in his youth. Seeing her as he grew up and knowing that he liked her as a person and not just a body helped break down in his mind the sexual stereotype that the white male community perpetuated about black women, which was that they had an uncontrollable libido and were good only for work and sex.⁴

McLaurin also writes about the Carter children and how they lived in incredibly brutal poverty. McLaurin says that “the connection between their poverty and their race was all too obvious” and that “their presence was an indictment of segregation, an inescapable accusation of [his]

² Ibid., 69-70.

³ Ibid., 136.

⁴ Ibid., 70-72, 81-88.

complicity in it.”⁵ Furthermore, McLaurin tells of Ed, the African American whom the ““best whites”” in Wade respected the most, and how he would sit outside the circle of Granddaddy’s friends at the store and listen to their conversations but was never once invited to participate.⁶ In regards to this treatment, McLaurin writes, “It wasn’t fair and I knew it, and I found that knowledge troublesome.”⁷ Betty Jo, the Carter children, and Ed are just three examples of people that indirectly and unknowingly challenged segregation simply by going about their daily lives. None of them calculated their actions to be subtle means of breaking down racial stereotypes in McLaurin’s mind and of helping him to start questioning the justness of segregation. They simply lived and did their best to survive and, in doing so, managed to challenge segregation as well.

On the other hand, McLaurin also provides some telling examples of people who did intentionally resist segregation in Wade, though they did so in indirect ways that were very similar to those above. McLaurin relates to the reader throughout his book that frank conversations about segregation and the role of race in people’s lives did not typically occur between white adults and white children. In fact, when McLaurin questioned a white adult about pretty much any heavy topic, whether it was race or religion, he was usually met with indifference and, often, anger. White adults expected white children to be silent and not to question what they were told.⁸ The indifference and hostility of white adults’ towards McLaurin’s questions created a power vacuum over his youthful curiosity and impressionability. It was upon this power vacuum that the African Americans McLaurin knew who intentionally resisted segregation capitalized.

⁵ Ibid., 96; 95-96.

⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁷ Ibid., 98; 97-98.

⁸ Ibid., 51, 59. Both of these pages provide strong examples of this treatment of McLaurin by white adults, though they are not by any means entirely inclusive, as others can be found throughout the book.

McLaurin writes of several African Americans who fill this void simply by treating him as an intelligent person and meeting his questions with sincere interest and respect. One of them was Street, a brilliant, largely self-educated man who worked as a missionary for the Jehovah's Witnesses. The white community looked down upon Street and thought him to be crazy because he was a Jehovah's Witness, did not have a steady job, lived in a cave-like home that he built for himself, and was black. However, through numerous conversations with Street, McLaurin came to discover that Street was not actually crazy but, in fact, that he and Street (a so-called "crazy nigger") "knew more, thought more, and, most important, had more desire to learn than did any of [McLaurin's] grandfather's friends."⁹ For McLaurin, his relationship with Street broke the segregationist idea that whites were blacks' intellectual superiors. McLaurin even says that Street was his mentor and that he started to see him as his equal.¹⁰

Another one of the African Americans that strove to influence McLaurin's ideas about segregation was Jerome. McLaurin and Jerome talked baseball together whenever they met and were both fans of the Yankees. From McLaurin's perspective, race never seemed to come into their conversations, until Jerome answered a question McLaurin asked him about the first African American player the Yankees signed. Jerome said, "They got a good man...I just wish they'd have done it sooner."¹¹ McLaurin explains the impact this comment had on him best when he writes, "Yet his one comment had enlarged my racial perspectives much more than...a Mays or a Newcomb. Ballplayers were removed from my life...Jerome was a part of my world, someone I cared about and respected."¹² McLaurin says Jerome's comment was his "way of endorsing the school desegregation case...it was his method of approving of the early stirrings of

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61, 56; 42-64.

¹¹ Ibid., 144.

¹² Ibid., 145.

the civil rights movement.”¹³ McLaurin’s intention is clear when he writes that “[Jerome], Ellie Howard, and the Yankees had helped to ensure that [McLaurin’s] would be the last generation of the segregated South.”¹⁴ He is saying that Jerome (and the people like Jerome that he had personal relationships with) did just as much in their own, less visible ways to help challenge and bring down segregation as the famous figures of the Civil Rights Movement did.¹⁵

The last major African American figures that McLaurin mentions who really strove to challenge his views on segregation are also the ones who finally made him realize that he could not become a part of the Southern system. These people were Jerry and Miss Carrie, and they both took deep interests in McLaurin’s life. Jerry took a strong interest in McLaurin’s social life, while Miss Carrie took a strong interest in his endeavors in school. Their genuine interests in him as a person were what helped him to really establish a personal connection with them. One day, about a year before McLaurin left for college, Jerry and Miss Carrie invited him into their home to have some pie. This instance was the first time that McLaurin had ever been inside an African American home, and, upon seeing the stark poverty in which they lived (and they were better off than many African Americans in Wade), McLaurin finally realized that he “could never comfortably accept the racial etiquette that had been an essential reality in the world of [his] father and grandfather.”¹⁶ McLaurin also realized, when he saw the conditions in which they lived, that Jerry and Miss Carrie had invited him in with a purpose, because he was “yet a juvenile, someone who could be taught and, perhaps, influenced by what he learned.”¹⁷ He

¹³ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴ Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁵ Ibid., 142-146.

¹⁶ Ibid., 154

¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

realized that their invitation was their own subtle attempt at challenging his beliefs about segregation.¹⁸

Though African American resistance to segregation did not happen in Wade, North Carolina the way it did in other parts of the South, McLaurin makes it clear that it did happen and that personal relationships and contact played a critical role. Some African Americans, such as Betty Jo, the Carter children, and Ed, unknowingly resisted segregation simply by living. Each of their existences was, in its own way, a living, breathing challenge to the justness of racial stereotypes and segregation. Others, such as Street, Jerome, and Jerry and Miss Carrie, made more calculated efforts to challenge segregation, yet their methods remained quiet and indirect. So, driven by the incredible risks of open resistance to find other, subtler ways of challenging segregation, the African Americans of Wade relied on indirect methods to influence whites (or, at least, McLaurin) and to help bring down the Southern system.

¹⁸ Ibid., 146-154.

Bibliography

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