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## We're all better off when we talk about race

WILLIAM TURNER IS A VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT EMORY SCHOOL OF LAW.

In a recent Transforming Communities Project Seminar, I had the chance to discuss with many colleagues my fascinating research on racial integration at Emory. TCP is a five-year project under the direction of Leslie Harris and Jody Usher to encourage discussion among all of Emory's constituents about race in the University's past, present and future. It raises all sorts of important, difficult questions about Emory's identity as a university, but also about the identity of the South, and of the United States as a whole.

I'm a legal scholar and historian. Woodruff Professor of Law Martha Fineman, who directs the Feminism and Legal Theory Project, invited me here to work with her in developing research on Emory's racial integration, especially the role of former Law Dean Ben F. Johnson Jr. Johnson represented the University in *Emory v. Nash*, the 1962 case in which Emory persuaded the state Supreme Court to strike down the provision of the state tax law that would have stripped the University of its tax exemption had it started admitting African American students. Yet another petty, but effective, example of racial segregation in action.

In most cases, law suits to desegregate universities involved a would-be student suing the institution. Emory was different. Its leading administrators, including Johnson and Board Chair Henry Bowden, saw that racial integration was a moral imperative, and that continued segregation would prevent Emory from becoming a national research university on par with Harvard, the University of Chicago and Stanford. So Emory sued the state.

A participant in the TCP seminar told a story of a first-year student at one of Emory's professional schools who loudly complained during a mandatory course about having to hear about race yet again. Why, she wondered, can't we just get over it? I suspect a lot of people think that without saying it.

One of many things I like about the Ben Johnson story is that it gives us the opportunity to talk about race at Emory and in the South while appreciating the leadership of the white men who chose to walk with the march of history instead of sniping at it from the sidelines.

Historians, like reporters, tend to focus on horror stories — Ross Barnett and George Wallace trying to stop African Americans from attending the University of Mississippi and the University of Alabama; Charlayne Hunter Gault and Hamilton Holmes running the racist gauntlet to integrate the University of Georgia. The time has come to focus on a success story — Emory University — instead.

The integration of Emory, like the integration of other Southern institutions, occurred only because African Americans demanded change and were willing to risk everything, including their lives, to make that change happen.

White people like Ben Johnson faced a choice in 1962, just as we face a different, but related, choice in 2007. I never quite understood why some white Southerners are so attached to their ideal image of the South as lily-white. (I should note that, while I grew up in Oklahoma City, most of my ancestors, including several slave owners, lived in the South). The results are, at best, self-defeating. For one hundred years, many white Southerners were more attached to segregation than to economic growth.

Economic growth has its drawbacks. But Atlanta really has long been a place of opportunity. As historian Allison Dorsey explained when she spoke here recently, even the horrors of the 1906 Race Riot were the result of success — white mobs resented the economic and cultural progress that African Americans created for themselves at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Forty years after the Riot, Atlanta became the “manger” of the Civil Rights Movement when 18,000 African Americans registered to vote.

Thus, Atlanta's role as a source of African American leadership is unique. As the leading private research university in Atlanta, Emory is unique. What happens at Emory matters for the rest of the city, for the state of Georgia, and for the entire South. It matters because of the number of students and employees who come here, and because of the new knowledge we produce.

The story of racial integration at Emory is one the University can be proud of. It's not always pretty, and bringing it up inevitably means facing conflicting emotions — love for the physical beauty and cultural inventiveness of the South tinged, for many of us, with a certain odd combination of regret and embarrassment. Such emotions are like tumors. The process of examining and letting go of them is painful, but that pain is minor compared to the many benefits of healing in our community that come from telling these stories.

The story of racial integration at Emory is a story of leadership. Not everyone has followed. At least some Emory alumni objected to the University's integration. But as I look around at the TCP seminar, I have to reflect

on the amazing range of talent Emory would not have now had it not chosen to integrate in 1962. I have the same thought on a larger scale as I look at the South generally. A region that is larger than many nations necessarily encompasses much variation.

Slavery and segregation were horrific and inexcusable. They worked only through violence. We can't undo that history.

We can redeem it. We can strive to make our nation, our region and our University a place of genuine opportunity for anyone who is willing to make a contribution. Ben Johnson thought so. Henry Bowden thought so. And they were both right. But their example creates a responsibility for those of us who come after to live up to.

Come to think of it, I'd love to stay here myself. But not if I can't sit down with Leslie Harris and many others to talk honestly about race. The Transforming Communities Project is like *Emory v. Nash* — maybe not strictly necessary, but clearly the best choice for the entire University.

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