

LAWRENCE OTIS GRAHAM

The “Black Table” Is Still There

Lawrence Otis Graham was born in 1962 into one of the few African-American families then living in an upper-middle-class community in Westchester County, near New York City. A graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, Graham works as a corporate attorney in Manhattan and teaches at Fordham University. He is the author of some dozen books, most recently *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (1999) and *The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty* (2007). The following essay, originally published in the *New York Times* in 1991, is included in Graham's 1995 essay collection, *Member of the Club: Reflections on Life in a Racially Polarized World*.

Background on school segregation In “The ‘Black Table’ Is Still There,” Graham returns to his largely white junior high school and discovers to his dismay how little has changed since the 1970s. Since the 1950s, the United States government has strongly supported integration of public schools. For example, the Supreme Court in 1954 found segregation of public schools unconstitutional; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required public school systems to implement integration programs; and in 1971, the Supreme Court upheld court-ordered busing as a means of achieving integration. The results of these policies were dramatic. From the mid-1960s to 1972, the number of African-American students attending desegregated schools jumped from 12 percent to 44 percent. By the 1990s, however, this had begun to change as the Supreme Court began to lift desegregation orders in response to local school boards' promises to desegregate voluntarily through magnet schools and the like. A study published in 2003 showed that two-thirds of African-American students attend schools that are predominantly minority and more than 15 percent attend schools that are 99 to 100 percent minority, a significant rise since 1989. Ironically, as Graham observes, when students are given the choice, self-segregation seems to be the norm.

During a recent visit to my old junior high school in Westchester 1
County, I came upon something that I never expected to see again, some-
thing that was a source of fear and dread for three hours each school morn-
ing of my early adolescence: the all-black lunch table in the cafeteria of my
predominantly white suburban junior high school.

As I look back on twenty-seven years of often being the first and only 2
black person integrating such activities and institutions as the college
newspaper, the high school tennis team, summer music camps, our all-
white suburban neighborhood, my eating club at Princeton, or my private
social club at Harvard Law School, the one scenario that puzzled me the
most then and now is the all-black lunch table.

Why was it there? Why did the black kids separate themselves? What 3
did the table say about the integration that was supposedly going on in
homerooms and gym classes? What did it say about the black kids? The
white kids? What did it say about me when I refused to sit there, day after
day, for three years?

Each afternoon, at 12:03 P.M., after the fourth period ended, I found 4
myself among six hundred 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds who marched into the
brightly-lit cafeteria and dashed for a seat at one of the twenty-seven blue
formica lunch tables.

No matter who I walked in with — usually a white friend — no matter 5
what mood I was in, there was one thing that was certain: I would not sit
at the black table.

I would never consider sitting at the black table. 6

What was wrong with me? What was I afraid of? 7

I would like to think that my decision was a heroic one, made in order 8
to express my solidarity with the theories of integration that my commu-
nity was espousing. But I was just twelve at the time, and there was nothing
heroic in my actions.

I avoided the black table for a very simple reason: I was afraid that by 9
sitting at the black table I'd lose all my white friends. I thought that by sit-
ting there I'd be making a racist, anti-white statement.

Is that what the all-black table means? Is it a rejection of white people? 10
I no longer think so.

At the time, I was angry that there was a black lunch table. I believed 11
that the black kids were the reason why other kids didn't mix more. I was
ready to believe that their self-segregation was the cause of white bigotry.

Ironically, I even believed this after my best friend (who was white) told 12
me I probably shouldn't come to his bar mitzvah because I'd be the only
black and people would feel uncomfortable. I even believed this after my
Saturday afternoon visit, at age ten, to a private country club pool prompted
incensed white parents to pull their kids from the pool in terror.

In the face of this blatantly racist (anti-black) behavior I still somehow 13
managed to blame only the black kids for being the barrier to integration
in my school and my little world. What was I thinking?

I realize now how wrong I was. During that same time, there were at 14
least two tables of athletes, an Italian table, a Jewish girls' table, a Jewish
boys' table (where I usually sat), a table of kids who were into heavy metal
music and smoking pot, a table of middle-class Irish kids. Weren't these
tables just as segregationist as the black table? At the time, no one thought
so. At the time, no one even acknowledged the segregated nature of these
other tables.

Maybe it's the color difference that makes all-black tables or all-black 15
groups attract the scrutiny and wrath of so many people. It scares and an-
gers people; it exasperates. It did those things to me, and I'm black.

As an integrating black person, I know that my decision *not* to join 16
the black lunch table attracted its own kinds of scrutiny and wrath from
my classmates. At the same time that I heard angry words like "Oreo" and

"white boy" being hurled at me from the black table, I was also dodging impatient questions from white classmates: "Why do all those black kids sit together?" or "Why don't you ever sit with the other blacks?"

The black lunch table, like those other segregated tables, is a comment on the superficial inroads that integration has made in society. Perhaps I should be happy that even this is a long way from where we started. Yet, I can't get over the fact that the twenty-seventh table in my junior high school cafeteria is still known as the "black table" — fourteen years after my adolescence.

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Comprehension

1. What exactly is the "black table"?
2. In paragraph 1, Graham says that on a recent visit to his old junior high school he "came upon something that [he] never expected to see again." Why do you think the sight of the all-black lunch table was such a surprise to him?
3. In Graham's junior high school, what factors determined where students sat?
4. Why didn't Graham sit at the "black table" when he was in junior high?
5. When he was a junior high school student, whom did Graham blame for the existence of the exclusively black lunch table? Whom or what does he now see as the cause of the table's existence?