**Bending the Academic Color Line: Allison Davis, the University of Chicago, and American Race Relations, 1941-1948**

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The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics of racial change through the landmark appointment of the Black social scientist, Allison Davis, to the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1942. As archival materials make clear, the appointment came to fruition through the collaboration of powerful White liberals at the Julius Rosenwald Fund and the University of Chicago, who seized upon a changing racial climate to challenge the color line and appoint an exemplary Black intellectual. This study aims to show how Davis’s desegregating appointment succeeded in furthering progressive research and in demonstrating Blacks’ abilities to a national audience, but ultimately accomplished little by way of combating the institutional racism within the academy and the larger society.

Keywords: Allison Davis, University of Chicago, Julius Rosenwald Fund, Edwin Embree

In 1942, Allison Davis secured a three-year appointment as an assistant professor of education at the University of Chicago. This accomplishment made him one of the first African Americans to gain a full-time faculty position at a predominantly White university. The appointment was therefore a civil rights landmark in an era when similar desegregation landmarks were on the horizon—in the defense industries, in professional baseball, in education, and in many other many arenas. Based on extensive archival research conducted in 2013 at Fisk University and the University of Chicago, this essay recounts the story of this little-known but significant case of desegregation. It explains how the efforts of individual actors and institutions coalesced with a rapidly changing American society to make this appointment possible, and it makes clear the far-reaching consequences this appointment had for racial change. At the same time, this study highlights those forces that resisted Davis’s appointment and constrained his career and life in Chicago in the 1940s. In the end, the article argues that this case of desegregation deepens the understanding of the modern civil rights movement and the dynamics of social change. Specifically, Davis’s appointment at Chicago reveals the importance of academia as a multifaceted terrain for racial change, including both scholarly production and physical racial integration. Perhaps even more, though, the story of the appointment exposes the limits of the desegregation movement amid a society built on racial inequality. High-profile cases of desegregation such as Davis’s were notable achievements, but they exposed a more glaring continuity in racial affairs. Such cases, in other words, bent rather than broke the color line.

**A CHANGING RACIAL CLIMATE**

When Edwin Embree and Ralph Tyler moved to challenge the academic color line and appoint Allison Davis to the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1941, they were responding to an American society that was in flux and that was newly ripe for racial change. During the 1930s, environmentalist interpretations of racial difference such as Davis’s own *Children of Bondage* (Davis & Dollard, 1940) and *Deep South* (Davis, Gardner, & Gardner, 1941) displaced hereditarian ones in social science (Sitkoff, 1978). In popular culture, too, the leveling effects of the Great Depression impressed on many Americans the power of the environment to shape people’s destinies. The ideological justifications for racial inequality therefore began to slowly break down.

Political movements aided this process, since leftists made racism a problem as never before. Beginning in the 1920s, but erupting with the Scottsboro Boys case in 1931(www.scottsboro-