
School Naming as Racial Resistance **Black School Principals** **and Critical Race Pedagogy** **in 1890 St. Louis**

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Introduction

After twelve years of community agitation, the Black public school principals in St. Louis, Missouri, named the twelve elementary schools serving their community in 1890 for famous members of their race (Gersman, 1972). All but one name came from those in William Wells Brown's (1863) *The Black Man*; three of the men were African American but not from the borders of the United States, and two of those names were well-known to the school principals as leaders of the only successful slave revolt: L'Ouverture and Dessalines. Black children and youth would learn of their potential for racial resistance as they entered schools named for these singular men.

This essay aims to extend the nascent theorizing over school names by cultural geographer Derek H. Alderman (2002) who suggests that such names could serve as "cultural arenas" for memory. The article, moreover, utilizes intellectual historian Stephan G. Hall's (2009) excavation of African-American historical writing to suggest a deep well of meaning that could inform this memory-inspired school naming. Thus, the article will explore how the meanings-rich memory work by the principals can be understood as critical race pedagogy (Jennings & Lynn, 2005) through the creation of "geographies of resistance," the "cultivation of communal and cultural assets," and the "activation of a liberatory consciousness" (Love, 2000, in Sharpe, 2014, p. 5; Pile & Keith, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

In particular, this article will highlight the place of Haiti in the

radical 19th century African-American diasporic imagination and at the forefront of the school naming action in 1890 St. Louis, Missouri. Given scant attention in late-20th century American history textbooks (Czemiak, 2006), the Haiti freedom struggle was much better understood by freedom-seeking Blacks in the 19th century as a veritable beacon to Black men schooled during “the dawn of freedom” (Hall, 2009, p. 124). Indeed, two of the St. Louis school principals had clear Haitian connections. One was Arthur Dessalines Langston, the eldest son of a former Minister of Haiti (Cheek & Cheek, 1989), and the other was Obadiah M. Wood, someone who resolutely sought to become Minister to Haiti (“The color line drawn,” 1889). Wood’s leadership of L’Ouverture School offers a further glimpse into Critical Race Pedagogy for the times. The year after his school relinquished No. 3 as its name, L’Ouverture 8th graders were led by their principal Wood to purchase public library cards for the then princely sum of one dollar. Enough students (and their families) raised the necessary funds that L’Ouverture students had more than half of all library cards held by St. Louis school-aged children and youth (Gersman, 1972). Thus, necessary access to more equal opportunity to learning was championed by Wood, an “American Toussaint” (Clavin, 2007).

Finally, this essay will offer a unique understanding of how Wood and others would utilize cultural empowerment techniques to socialize and acculturate their communities (Rabaka, 2003). Du Bois (1973) inquired, “How can we use the accumulated wisdom of the world for the full development of human power?” (p. 10). These names represent a conscious radical effort to stimulate the historical memories lost by the cultural dislocation of the communities these schools served (Assante, 1987). Educational practitioners can synthesize the lesson given to us through the courage of these men with their call to rehabilitate the value of a holistic experience and liberation of thinking for their future learners. Also, this lesson can be utilized to incite the courage to create a professional discourse centered upon collective leadership efforts to reformulate the present day oasis of critical race pedagogical practice.

Linking the Historical Memory

The construction of racial and nationalistic identity was of grave importance for the formerly enslaved. The collective memory of the African-American community was riddled with remnants of White supremacy, cultural inferiority, and the failed promise of liberty and justice witnessed from the Reconstruction Era. To substantiate cultural relevancy and liberatory ideals, school naming was one of a variety of subversive acts to reinstitute a positive African identity and bolster a

collective sense of self-reliant activity. Paramount to Black communities in the late 19th century were acts to reclaim the very humanity stripped by the enslavement of Africans throughout the global diaspora. To reactivate the historical memory and ignite the liberatory consciousness without obstacle, a focused and strategic effort was needed to progress the freedom seeking ideals of the oppressed (Love, 2000). African-American educators during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced a philosophical and political agenda in their approach to all curriculum, programming, and this instance, the naming of geographies where white supremacy were systematically challenged and Black ontologies were redefined (King, 2015).

The enslavement of African people failed to curtail the desire of an “expanding, educated, and literate population to define itself as more than slaves or circumscribed citizens” (Hall, 2009, p. 18). Invariably, African enslavement throughout the diaspora bolstered the examination of liberation and all factors included within it. The “idea of progress” within the liberatory construct involved a collective seeking of literacy, enlightened thinking, and historical connectedness to radical progressive ideals (Hall, 2009). The denial of Black humanity was more than just a socio-political denial; it was an attempt to remove the African-American collective away from the possibilities of reimagining themselves. Hall (2009) asserts, “Rethinking the African-American role in Western civilization required a systematic engagement with Black achievements, ancient and modern” (p. 42). For Black principals in 1890 St. Louis, the simplistic act of naming schools after “Black Revolutionaries” depicts a successful ploy to engage their communities with a reimagining of their collective selves and progression towards the freedom ideals of the American Republic. King (2014) asserts, “The purpose was to tenaciously challenge the prevailing ontological conceptions of African-Americans” (p. 521).

The Haitian Revolution and its actors represented a thread of hope and self-deterministic accomplishment for formerly enslaved Africans within the Western region of the world. To better understand the American liberty ideal for the displaced African, the Haitian Revolution provided a historical framework for “attaining their freedom through revolutionary struggle” (Hall, 2009, p. 88). For White society, memories of slave insurrections provided only the tangible deconstruction of White supremacy, not the possibilities of transformative democracy (Bromell, 2009; Hall, 2009). L'Ouverture and Dessalines prompted a cultural possibility to Black liberation and self-governance. A physical revolution would not be a viable strategy for the African American within White hegemonic power structures, but an intellectual and communal revolutionary liberatory practice could be sustained through subversive means in

Post-Reconstruction America. Matthew Calvin (2007) argues, “Enslaved Americans understood that memory of the Haitian Revolution was an incendiary device that both shattered the idea of white supremacy and sent shivers up the spines of both sections” (p. 106). In contrast, the formerly enslaved envisioned Haiti and its heroes as an everlasting symbol that, indeed, embraced the shattering of White supremacy, but not as a device to incite fear in their fellow countrymen. Specifically, the memory of oppression’s enemies acted as a catalyst that promoted cultural pride and belief in oft-promised democratic ideal. Essentially, using Haiti as a model to restore cultural pride “assisted in making a compelling case for Black inclusion into ideas regarding republicanism and democracy” (Hall, 2009, p. 120). Juxtaposed to “professionally trained and autodidactic historians,” such as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B DuBois, Langston and Wood used school naming for racial uplift to fully exemplify the authentic humanity of the progeny of the African diaspora (King, 2015).

Schools for the African-American community have historically played a dominant role in shaping the “collective memory” and “historical identity” of the surrounding communities. (Alderman, 2002, p. 605). The educational landscape of Black schooling in 1890 St. Louis, Missouri, evidenced the prevailing attitudes of Black inferiority, segregation, and poorly resourced school systems. Obadiah Wood, an “American Toussaint,” tactfully and strategically aimed to empower and acculturate community stakeholders and learners with the liberatory ideals of their African revolutionary ancestry (Calvin, 2007) “by merging history and the physical environment, place names and other special commemorations work to rectify certain visions of the past, giving them legitimacy and identification with the natural order of things” (Alderman, 2002, pg. 605). The reconciliation of the historical memory for the 19th century African American was essential to the rehabilitation to the collective spirit and psyche that the internalized oppression of enslavement rendered on the African-American collective. The merging of physical environment with the positive historical achievement of African people would bolster the economic, social, and political reality of communities. Blacks had been denied the capability of assuming the mantle of humanity (Hall, 2009).

Calvin (2007) argues, “In the middle of the nineteenth century, African Americans were part of a diasporic culture that was neither exclusively African or American. They, instead, occupied the middle ground between those two poles, immersed in a Black Atlantic tradition that defied national, political, and temporal boundaries” (p. 104). While African Americans possessed a centrality of nationalistic and cultural identity in the nineteenth century, it was pertinent to establish a socio-political

foundation that would redefine the vision and value of those displaced and disconnected by the vestiges of enslavement. A re-colonization of Africa was not a plausible reality for the multitude of African-American people who struggled with the utopian ideals of true democratic practice in American society. To better understand the centrality of the African-American identity, L'Ouverture and Dessalines' radical activity would be the perfect models to conceptualize the balance between a pragmatic democratic utopia and a cultural and spiritual relationship with the ancestral African liberation practice (Calvin, 2007; Dawson, 2005). In essence, creating a cultural arena to resist the inferior and heathenistic identity defined by societal propaganda, the utility of Haitian revolutionary action prompted African-American communities to imagine Black humanity as capable of attaining freedom and intellectual enough to overcome hegemonic power structures by self-definition (Hall, 2009). Psychologically, it created an opportunity for African-American communities to have "detailed and reliable ways" to disseminate their own history, not the history that they had been forced to digest as the only narrative of the African in the Western Hemisphere (Hall, 2009, p. 170).

The practice of school naming and linking Black historical consciousness, indeed, was a concentrated effort to engage in a war on the Black stereotypes and misrepresentations about the race. Black intellectuals, such as Langston and Wood, "demonstrated how conversant they were with the wellspring" of African intellectual culture (Hall, 2009, p. 234). Their understanding of the need for the collective understanding of Black liberatory activity, modeling prominent and positive historical models for the community, allowed for the materializing of subjective reality of African people within the community they served. With no formal political, social, or economic means of progressing African-American people closer to full inclusion within American society, radical acts as simple as a "naming" would bolster the hope and possibility of a new future of existence for Black citizens (Hall, 2009).

School Naming as Critical Race Pedagogy

Historically, educational ideologies have perpetuated the belief systems of popular society. Within these belief systems, specific to nineteenth century thinking, were the philosophies that bolstered African-American intellectual, spiritual, and humanistic inferiority. William Watkins (2001) argues, "Organized education, much like organized religion, has long been influenced by the forces of the power structure, the state, and those with an ideological agenda" (p. 10). Education has a vital role in shaping society for the future. For the African community to operate

above levels of subsistence, Black intellectuals were obligated to employ a focused strategy to develop and sustain intrinsic value within the African-American communities they served. In stark contrast to the accommodationist theories that mobilized Black education throughout the nineteenth century, Wood and Langston offer an ideological exploration of Black possibility within a system that sought to reconcile the institution of slavery (Watkins, 2001).

Jennings and Lynn (2005) contend, "Critical Pedagogy as a discourse on schooling relies mainly on three theoretic and analytic strands of thought: (1) Social Reproduction Theory, (2) Cultural Reproduction Theory, and (3) Theories of Resistance" (p. 18). Specific to school naming, Theories of Resistance illuminates the tactical measure acknowledged by Wood and Langston to subvert the ideology of White hegemony. Theories of Resistance assumes the notice of emancipatory practice as its guiding notion and is interwoven with morality and ethics as the foundation of pedagogy (Giroux, 1983; Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Black public schooling existed as a "political act" that was influenced by "hegemonic social relationships, labor market economics, class stratification, and racial division" (Watkins, 2001, p. 179). Within the social, political, and economic challenges of 1890 St. Louis, Missouri, a critical pedagogy for black school principals such as Wood and Langston would offer learners a "self-formation" despite greater society's racist motives (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

Further, the theory of resistance is uniquely tied to Afrocentric pedagogical ideology as a platform for learning and culture specific identification. The reinstatement of the African-American identity rejects European and American social theories as the only legitimate models of inquiry (Watkins, 1993, p. 331). Educational theorists have agreed that public schooling has failed to provide the appropriate cultural foundations for African-American learners. Naming a school and infusing an African centered curriculum combated the struggle against slavery, colonialism, segregation, and cultural domination (Watkins, 1993). In the quest for self-definition, a critical pedagogy uniquely tied to the African ideal offers a transcendence that exceeds the material reality of students and their communities.

The evolution of any people is directly tied to their formal and informal education. Revolutionary school naming employed an opportunity to engage in a long term, systemic, public discourse to make particular forms of experience and projections of Black social life dominant (Anderson, 1988, p. 279). Wood and Langston, sixty years ahead of the Black freedom struggle, vehemently believed that the commitment to giving students the opportunity to construct meaning from their experiences

would give them the ability reshape their world (Perlstein, 2002, p. 254). This belief, as Perlstein (2002) argues, gives students a focus on self-discovery and self-expression and a desire to critique a society that oppresses (p. 257). The utility of critical pedagogy not only shapes one's understanding of cognition, but one's understanding of political and social relations (Perlstein, 2002, p. 268). Liberatory and resistance ideology allowed for shaping of an acute consciousness of African Americans in segregated communities and their social and political relationship with hegemonic power structures. This supposition asserts the notion of the simple act of school naming is ultimately directed at rescuing and reclaiming a denied humanity of people of African descent and promises a radical transformation within specific geographies (Rabaka, 2003). Ultimately, these specific geographies, limited in existence during this historical time frame, offered a space where Black people "had to understand themselves in relation to the world and reject notions of a white mystification and recover vanished and denied histories" (King, 2015, p. 525).

Reiland Rabaka (2003) contends, "When persons of African origin and descent think and judge everything by their own terms, they share the perspective or point of view of their people with the wider world, they extend and expand what it means to be both African and human" (p. 407). No persistent efforts to progress or acknowledge the humanity of African people existed throughout public schooling for Black children in 1890 St. Louis. A radical cultural shift necessitated a cognitive removal from the enslavement and sharecropping peonage. Liberatory spaces, such as schools, require African people to be bound together by psychology, not biology (Rabaka, 2003). Black revolutionary modeling offered a psychological unification and unique historical understanding of a people's history that simply cannot be defined by the shackles of institutional, political, and racial history of the enslavement. Wood and Langston recognized the endemic nature of racism and how it can psychologically deconstruct an already tattered identity of the African-American collective (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Within a critical pedagogical practice, African liberation "thought and practice" in the fight against institutional and societal enslavement should be instructional for African and other oppressed people (Rabaka, 2003, p. 411). The emergence of African-American culture is without possibility if a critical understanding of African history and liberatory practice is not infused within the cultural arenas schools provide. The plague of problems historically induced on the African-American culture will reemerge if not given a critical lens of examination. Moreover, a critical pedagogy that is infused with Afrocentricity prompts students to internalize its philosophy and

undergo a transformation leading to enlightenment concerning their authentic selves. Also, it empowers them to consider the choices laid out before them, and self-determination concerning the choices they make (Merry & New, 2008).

Conclusion

The presence of mind of Wood, Langston, and their fellow school principals illuminates the self-determination and undeniable faith in a transformative democracy that unveils the wealth of the African-American spirit. The functionality of a liberatory space called Black educators, students, and the surrounding communities to act for themselves in the plight for recognition. Most important, they constructed an alternative reality that assumed a progressive and plausible possibility for the future of Black existence. L'Ouverture and Dessalines offered the displaced African in America hope that liberation was not a futile objective. Most important, it was a statement to White society that the formerly enslaved could attain a self-defined intellectual, communal, and political freedom that would not subside under the inherent racist and practice within the American confine. School naming was not only an effort to create a "geography of resistance," but to indirectly and subversively reconnect the Black collective to an alternative and progressive state of consciousness.

The nineteenth century African American desperately needed a reconstitution of memory in order to facilitate the creation of the Black identity. The future of the race would depend on a liberated mind systematically disconnected from the vestiges of the enslavement of African people. Hall (2009) contends, "Haiti was an indisputable example of the benefits of immediate emancipation" (p. 107). Wood and Langston understood that emancipatory thinking, utilizing Haiti as the model for African possibility, would aid in the psychological overhaul needed to invariably disconnect Blacks from their own internalized oppression. Both men believed that education should expose diasporic Africans "not only to their distinct and unique history and culture, but also to their problems and historical circumstances" (Rabaka, 2003, p. 413). The linking of the African-American historical memory, coupled with critical pedagogy, provided a road map for human possibility for African Americans in the nineteenth century (Hall, 2009). Further, the linking of historical memory would elevate Black people to a position of preeminence (Hall, 2009).

The narrow confines of the American experience can be expanded with a truthful discourse that calls for a universal awakening and re-

activation of our historical memories. Wood and Langton utilized their understanding of the vitality of the African diasporic experience to “paint a portrait of Black possibility” (Hall, 2009, p. 63). The utopian ideals of equitable democratic practice cannot be attained without initiating the healing process that the reclaiming of the historical memory and critical pedagogy and discourse employs us to embrace. Wood and Langton championed a vision of cultural congruity and holistic learning, where the school promoted the process of self-rediscovery and connectedness to the African diasporic experience for the community, of which a true understanding of “self” is derived (Merry & New, 2008).

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