Preparedness as a counter-memory. School desegregation, social chances and life chances

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ABSTRACT

How should we understand the conundrum of love for the segregated school – a system built to keep you in your place? In Gone Home. Race and Roots through Appalachia, Karida L. Brown looks at African American teacher’s work in segregated schools and shows how desegregation could be felt in both gains and losses in the black community. Those teachers prepared their students for a world of integration without freedom. This essay proposes a counter-memory of segregation, a relational agency of teachers past that remains to this day. Former students’ commemoration of teachers, principals, and schools dating from the time of institutionalized racial exclusion works as a symbolic reminder in a still-racist world, representing not only the need to be prepared, but also to stay prepared.

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Introduction

How often are teachers commemorated? Have you ever heard of a street being named after a school principal? This is what happens in Gone Home. Race and Roots through Appalachia by Karida L. Brown. When the “colored schools” in Benham and Lynch close their doors in 1963 as a result of desegregation policy, labour retrenchment and out-migration, this was certainly a sign of progress, but also, in the black community, a sign of change that simultaneously brought with it a kind of social emptiness. Or as Clara Clements, a former teacher at Lynch Colored Public School, describes this desegregation: “We gained what we wanted but we lost what we had” (Brown 2018, 156).

This conundrum of experiencing love for the segregated school that was there to keep you in your place is described and analysed by Brown. In my view, the findings of feeling safe and believed in as a student in a segregated
school in times of institutionalized racial exclusion and how the outcome of desegregation both were perceived as one of gains and loss in the black community is worth further attention.

I must say that is rare to find an academic text that piques the sociological imagination (Mills 2000) with such elegance. The interrelatedness of how subjectivities are shaped alongside racial ideologies, industrial booms and decline, migration and desegregation processes, while racism persist, is brought to the reader through empirical thickness and analytical sharpness in this community biography. The book is based on more than 150 oral history interviews with African Americans whose families arrived in Kentucky as a result of the Great Migration, or as accurately described by Brown as the great escape from the Deep South. Racism was the main reason for escaping and work opportunities in the coal mines were the main reason for resettlement in Harlan County. In the book we meet individuals sharing memories of how it was to study, work and live their everyday lives in eastern Kentucky.

In this book essay, I set out to do two things. First, I wish to open the door to the “colored school” and theorize it as a case of relational teacher agency. Second, I want to look at how this agency still reverberates in current memory practices as a form of counter-memory in the yearly home-coming activities of the diasporic African American community of Appalachia.

**Horizontal and vertical strategies**

The segregated school and its “black pedagogy” (Brown 2018, 119) were, when working at their best, in accordance with contemporary pedagogical research on evidence-based learning (Hattie 2009; Lund and Lund 2016). This involved having high expectations, a holistic view of the child, working with clear learning goals and most of all taking it for granted that black students were capable of learning and showing in practice that one believed in them. In my own ethnographic research from Sweden, I have seen how teachers can help migrant students manoeuvre through the formal structures of schooling in the face of racial prejudice and discrimination. In the migrant students’ own words, such teachers “stand by your side”, “show respect for different students, personalities and needs”, show you that you are “able to learn”, “you can be yourself” and “nobody laughs at you” and the teachers “never give up on you”. In such school culture the teachers want to be with their students and care about them (Lund and Trondman 2017; see also Lund 2015a, 2015b). These words almost echo the statements made by former students of the “colored school” when they think back on their school experience: “the teachers cared – truly cared” (Brown 2018, 148), “no child was to be called dumb or be dumb” (116), “They wanted to make sure that everybody that they taught would have a very good education” (115), and the teachers “believed in our capabilities or who saw the future and what we could bring to the future” (117).
The students and their parents saw the teachers in Brown’s fieldwork as holding the “key to unlocking opportunity’s door” (110). But what opportunity? During a period of increasing civil rights for black Americans and an industrial decline in the mountains and hollows of eastern Kentucky, the teachers themselves were convinced that a change was going to come. But what the nature of this change would be and what outcomes individuals living their everyday life in the mining towns would experience were unclear. The only thing the teachers must have felt strongly was that the change would not occur on black people’s terms.

Thus, the students needed to be prepared for a change of unknown character. The practice of preparedness was pursued through, as I see it, a horizontal and a vertical strategy (see also Lund 2016). The horizontal strategy consisted of caring practices that took place both within and outside the actual school building, irrespective of actual school hours. The teachers became part of the students’ and their families’ everyday life. The students’ self-confidence was going to be built on the taken-for-granted and solid ground of being, in Brown’s words, “care-worthy” (119).

The vertical strategy was connected to formal learning goals. But it did not stay at the officially stated goals, instead it went beyond them and integrated extracurricular textbooks, for example in Latin and literature. Teachers also took the opportunity to incorporate current political affairs into history class as well as to train and, rather harshly, discipline the students in the rules of etiquette, including hygiene. It seems as though the teachers knew deep down that their students needed cultural capital in the form of knowledge and how to conduct themselves. The goal of preparedness, as I understand it, was to create a model student who, first of all, believed in her-/himself and, secondly, could compete with white students in an integrated society. The teachers’ message to their students was: “you can’t be just as good, and you have to be better” (112).

The vertical process of working toward embodied cultural capital was woven through the horizontal level of care, where the teachers also shared bits and pieces of their own life, contributing to racial consciousness and mutual understanding. This is reminiscent of the kind of holistic love I associate with the words of James Baldwin:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. (*The Fire Next Time* [1963] 1993, 95)

**Relational teacher agency as a social movement**

The combination of horizontal and vertical strategies can be summoned up by the concept of relational teacher agency (Pantić 2017). Through relations, high
expectations and belief in their students the teachers in the “colored schools” sought to increase their students’ scope of action. When these schools shut their doors and students stood on the threshold to the white school one Monday morning, this contributed, but only seemingly paradoxically, to the feeling of a social void, of “misrecognition and unwantedness” (Brown 2018, 146). The students knew what school could be and give, a space of self-evident recognition, and missed it when it was no longer there as a result of encountering a racist normative school system. The closure of their schools was “a source of trauma, as it represented the negation of their cultural identity” (145).

Even if the benefits of and self-evident change toward an integrated school system were agreed upon among the majority of Brown’s informants, in practice actively participating in desegregation was not easy – even when the students were well prepared by a teaching corps that belonged to a social and educational movement that was confident in offering cultural capital, or at least a basic education, to black children. This social movement, as I learned from reading Brown, also involved one of the founding scholars of sociology, W. E. B Du Bois. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, black college students were encouraged to seek out, during their vacation months, country schools in order to “enlighten the black masses” (2018, 108).

A reflection on the need to foster the model student could also be connected to strategies that evolved as an outcome of racist ideology. Brown makes a connection to the everyday life of African Americans in Appalachia and their migration history. Just as Sayad (2004) stresses, the processes of settlement in a new place cannot be understood without taking into account the economic, social and cultural living conditions that were left behind as well as these conditions’ continuing importance. The adult community members’ care for and control over, for example, how children behaved in public were actually considered a way for all of them to survive. They knew, and had experience of, how one person’s mistake could cause aspersions to be cast over the entire black community. In light of this survival strategy, the teachers’ inclination to try to foster the model student is understandable. Conveying the middle-class values included in bourgeois comportment, including the importance of educational merits, become a way of creating conditions for survival in an integrated, but nonetheless racist world. Persistent suffering is also visible today, for example in the research of Dow (2016). She shows how the parenting strategies of mothers of African American boys are aimed at informal training in specific behavioural performances and situational awareness, the goal being to shape encounters with the gender-racist world in ways that will literally keep their young sons alive.

Opportunities as social chances and life chances

So, back to the puzzle of experiencing loss of an institution that was created to keep you in a subordinated position. The segregated school, although not free
from colourism and class distinctions, was reminiscent of how Patricia Hill Collins defines safe spaces as “free of surveillance by more powerful groups” and how this can, just like teachers’ relational agency, work toward “independent self-definitions” and agency (2002, 111). In Paul Willis’ words: “in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves” (2000, xiv). And the “colored schools” as Brown point to “contributed greatly to the formation of a distinctly black identity” (2018, 144). This process of cultural production was, as an example, visible, because the students and their families were convinced that the teachers in the segregated schools held the key to new opportunities.

Merton (1996) wrote a short essay on opportunity structures. In this text we encounter, through his reading of Weber and Dahrendorf, a discussion concerning life chances and social chances. Life chances are connected to the differentiation of opportunities vis-à-vis the social hierarchies, such as race, ethnicity, gender and class, in a society. Social chances are connected to the expansion or contraction of opportunity structures. The integrated school system could be seen as a new social chance provided by changes on the macro- and meso-level. But at the same time didn’t the actual life chances in terms of embodiments of hierarchical thinking within colourism in society change. Having a lighter skin tone was, and is, an advantage, at least within the reaches of Western colonialism (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Voyer and Lund 2018). This means that social chances not automatically are a cause for increasing life chances.

The desegregation process meant that the black students went to the white schools, leaving teachers, classrooms, hallways and school emblems behind them. At these new schools, they encountered teachers who did not understand their history or truly care about their future life chances (with the exception of talented black male athletes). In light of this, it is easy to see that the value of being recognized as a unique individual with cognitive capabilities was lost, at least temporally. New social chances, an expansion of opportunity structures, did not automatically bring new life chances. In other words, what could be witnessed was integration without freedom.

As reported by Brown, in the beginning of desegregation, in the world of racial ideologies, the black students were afraid they would not make it in an integrated school. They feared their inferiority to white students would be proven. But this was clearly not the case. What could at first glance be seen as the possibility of friendships in patterns of heterophily between social dissimilars turned out to be friendships among social similars. Students of different colours saw that they, at least to a certain degree, shared experiences of both hardships and pleasures in life. School desegregation was not always most important for new social chances such as mobility, but as Brown points out, most of all it was important for psychological wellbeing. It allowed the black students to look inside themselves and their black cultural identity
and see that they were not less intelligent or capable than the white students – it reminded them of their former school teachers’ message: “black was not a disability” (2018, 120).

**Preparedness as a counter-memory**

The highly engaged teachers in the “colored schools” narrowed their own opportunities by preparing their students for a new life and social chances. These teachers lost their jobs as a result of the racist desegregation process because this political change did not include the possibility for African American teachers to work in the integrated school system. But the social and cultural heritage of the teacher’s relational agency is still alive. The horizontal relations of mutual care and the agency the teachers strengthened within their students still exist. When the “colored school building” in Lynch was for sale about ten years after its last class had graduated, the former students bought it. Today it is used for a yearly home-coming event – as a place to celebrate a shared past. Metal plaques inset in schools walls commemorate the teachers and a street leading to the school’s parking lot has been renamed John V. Coleman Way, in honour of and out of respect for the last sitting principal. So, even if the teachers and the principals themselves became racially excluded in the process of desegregation, their work with creating relational agency among their former students and their relatives is very much alive.

The commemoration connected to the school is a way of regaining control over the narrative of shared struggles, and recognizing that the desegregation was not carried out on their terms. Memory, as Michel Foucault put it, is a “very important factor in struggle” and “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism” (1974, 25). The children and youth in the “colored school” were the ones who had to change their everyday life. It is possible to interpret the memory practices connected to the school building and the memories of the teachers’ relational agency as a counter-memory (Foucault 1977). It is not a private memory but a collective one; it is not associated with the official accounts, and it materializes a memory of historical and contemporary struggles. As I have formulated it in an earlier text: “An orientation toward the future through memory also contains a story of continuity, because memories can be shared with future generations” (Lund 2018). The embodied memory of the desegregation process, seen through the school as a memory site, reminds the dispersed black community from eastern Kentucky, and the younger generation that follows, that racism can be part of a process that strives for democratic development. The quest for equal distribution of life chances is far from over. Social change, including notions of progress, is not linear or without an inherent racism. In this sense, the teachers’ relational agency is present; they wanted their students to be prepared for change, and the commemoration of the school building, principals and
teachers is symbolic work representing the need to not just be prepared, but to stay prepared. Or as the Czech novelist Milan Kundera writes: “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (1980, 3).

**Note**

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