

More Than Slaves: Black Founders, Benjamin Banneker, and Critical Intellectual Agency

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Using the philosophical lenses of revisionist ontology and the politics of personhood, this paper explores the notion of Black Founders of the United States. I introduce the concept critical intellectual agency to argue that Black Founders brought unique contributions to the American experience. Their efforts were twofold. First, Black Founders established separate Black institutions that would become staples in Black communities after emancipation. Second, Black Founders challenged the supposed egalitarian beliefs of White Founders through media outlets. To illustrate, I focus on one Black Founder, Benjamin Banneker and his letter to Thomas Jefferson to illustrate how Black Founders philosophically responded and challenged White Founders prejudicial beliefs about Blackness. This paper seeks to challenge social studies teachers' curricular and pedagogical approaches to Black Americans during the colonial period by providing a heuristics and language to explore the voices of Black Americans in U.S. history.

Keywords: Black founders, Founding fathers, Black history, Benjamin Banneker, Thomas Jefferson, revisionist ontology

Introduction

When students and teachers open elementary and secondary United States history textbooks and turn the pages to sections detailing the founding of the United States of America, they are likely to be bombarded with images and texts of great American heroes and inspirational citizens who believed they had the inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Declaration of Independence, 1776, para. 2). At the forefront of these renderings, stand the Founding Fathers, a group of wealthy, privileged, land owning (and sometimes slave owning) White men, who set the framework for the freedom documents (Bernstein, 2009), the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The accolades of historical figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay are often seen as devoid of any flaws in the eyes of the textbook curriculum and are celebrated as the *sole* Founders of the United States of America (Morris, 1973). Many citizens today hold a special place in their hearts for the Founders and their democratic ideals.

What has been missing in the Founders' narrative in the official social studies curriculum is the recognition and contributions of Black Americans and others who the freedom documents did not acknowledge. (For this paper, the term official social studies curriculum includes the formal curriculum represented through textbooks, curriculum materials, state and national standards, and other formalized historical narratives. See Apple (2000) for additional information.) The official social studies curriculum does not elucidate Black Americans and communities that challenged the Founders' supposed egalitarian ideas. When Black Americans during the colonial period are recognized in social studies curriculum, they are understood as slaves with limited agency (Journell, 2008; King, 2014). If Black American agency (the conscious efforts to fight against oppression) is approached in the curriculum, these renderings

are limited to stories of slave escapes and revolts. To be clear, resistance in the form of run-aways and rebellions are important historical moments to understand Black Americans' desire for freedom and to diminish the popular discourse of the good master and happy and docile slave narratives (Elson, 1964; Phillips, 1916). These particular narratives, however, do not communicate the totality of Black Americans' actions in expressing their displeasure with subservience and the intellectual strategies that helped them garner freedom.

What has been missing in the official social studies curriculum is a discourse on Black Founders, those African American women and men who intellectually challenged ideas set forth by White Founders (King & Womac, 2014). Throughout the mid 18th to mid 19th centuries, Black Founders helped establish Black institutions, served in the military, developed Maroons settlements, and used media to openly challenge and critique the practical ideas of democracy. As it stands, there is not an in-depth discussion in the social studies research and practice about Black Founders and their intellectual efforts toward nation building. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide social studies teachers with a heuristic to understand how Black Founders not only contributed to U.S. democracy but also how they challenged intellectually White Founders' inaccurate ideas about Blackness.

Black Founders illustrated what I term critical intellectual agency. Such agency explores the philosophical and practical approaches to how Black Americans responded to racialization and the limited citizenship opportunities in the United States. Black Founders understood that a large majority, if not all, of the White Founders believed or acquiesced to the racial theories of the time. I use the theoretical framework of Revisionist Ontology (Mills, 1998) with a special emphasis on the resistance to sub-personhood to describe Black Founders' strategy to present an alternative perspective of Blackness. Their method for the recognition of full personhood status, or citizenship, was to challenge and to repudiate White Founders' troubling racial ideas.

The concept of race is a social invention that blossomed during the late 17th and early 18th centuries (Fields, 1990; Jordan, 1968; Omi & Winant, 1994; Winant, 2009). The advent of the American colonies and the ideology of race occurred simultaneously and were used as way to describe difference in humanity. Historian Barbara Fields (1990) noted, "American racial ideology [was] as original an invention of the Founders as [was] the United States itself" (p. 101). According to the American Anthropological Association (1998):

Race was a mode of classification linked specifically to peoples in the colonial situation. It subsumed a growing ideology of inequality devised to rationalize European attitudes and treatment of the conquered and enslaved peoples... The ideology magnified the differences among Europeans, Africans, and Indians, established a rigid hierarchy of socially exclusive categories underscored and bolstered unequal rank and status differences, and provided the rationalization that the inequality was natural or God-given (para. 4).

Along with physical features, cultural and behavioral traits became markers for racial identities. Whiteness and its cultural characteristics became the standard of being human and the apex of civilization. Non-Whites were classified as religious heathens, naturally savage, and docile. These concepts placed them in the lowest classification of human being or sub-persons (Mills, 1998). The racial classification of Africans as the lowest form of humanity was justification for race-based slavery, which was seen ultimately as the appropriate institution to civilize Black people (Jordan, 1968).

Many White Founders promoted the above-mentioned racial ideology. Among them, was the prominent Thomas Jefferson, who served as one of the authors of Declaration of Independence, Ambassador to France, Secretary of State, and third President of the United States. Through his manuscript, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), his racial thoughts about Black Americans were revealed. In this article, I illustrate how one Black Founder, Benjamin Banneker correspondence with Thomas Jefferson about race and placed him at the apex of abolitionist thought. Through this exchange, Banneker was able to challenge ideas about Blackness, race and how Black personhood was defined and conceptualized by a representative of the state.

The article is structured in four parts. I first established and defined my interpretation of those considered to be White and Black Founders. I then explained Revisionist Ontology and introduce the topic of critical intellectual agency through the typology of Black personhood. Following this, a framework to discuss Banneker's challenge of Jefferson was implemented. I concluded with suggestions to help social studies teachers' re-conceptualize Black history and begin to understand the saliency of Black Founders to U.S. democracy.

Founding Fathers Defined

It is important here to establish and define, the traditional notions of U.S. Founders and how I conceptualize Black Founders. According to R.B. Bernstein (2009), the phrase founding fathers was first coined by Senator and former President William Harding and came to refer to the men who framed and adopted "a series of documents of political foundations, constitutions, declarations, Bill of Rights, treaties, and laws" (p. 8). These statesmen or politicians who signed the Declaration of Independence participated in the American Revolution, and were also delegates and signers of the Constitution of the United States of America. The most laudable Founders were the ones involved in two salient events in history: the Second Continental Congress of 1776 and the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (Bernstein, 2009). These framers of the Constitution and signers of the Declaration of Independence helped to adopt and to establish what are considered the philosophies of American democracy. Although the academic scholarship on Founders has expanded to include: ordinary citizens, soldiers, women, Native Americans, and Black Americans (Brown, Cowley & King, 2011; King & Womac, 2014; Newman, 2008 a; Newman, 2008 b; Norton, 2011; Young, Nash, & Raphael, 2011), the official social studies curriculum and the collective memory of many Americans still hold firm the notion that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were the sole developers of representative democracy.

This article is about reconfiguring this narrative. To be clear, White Founders were responsible for establishing a representative democracy framework in the New World, but due to popular ideas concerning White supremacy, their original ideas and actions had severely racist undertones, were undemocratic, and were responsible for promoting Whiteness as property for full citizenship (Finkelman, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Mills, 1998). For example, the majority of the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders, and more than a quarter of U.S. Presidents enslaved Black Americans (Lusane, 2011; Young, Raphael, & Nash, 2013). The three-fifths compromise, the 20-year extension of slave trade, and the fugitive slave law promoted White supremacy and a racial hierarchy that made all "non-White groups less worthy and less eligible for citizenship" (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 110). The Naturalization Act of 1790 was only extended to free white persons and did not account for Native Americans

and Asians as well as Black Americans whether free and enslaved (Tehrani, 2000). Chief Justice Robert Brook Taney stated in his majority opinion in *Dred Scott v. John F.A. Sanford* (1857) that White Founders never intended to extend citizenship rights to Black Americans.

These historic and vivid examples of how Whiteness was established and endorsed by the U.S. government led to Thurgood Marshall's (1987) statement that the "Constitution [and ideas around democracy] was defective from the start" (p. 1338). The first Black American to serve on the Supreme Court continued to note the contemporary Constitution is a living document espoused through the efforts of "those who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of liberty, justice, and equality and who strived to better them" (p. 1341). There were some White Founders and groups who supported total egalitarianism such as Thomas Paine (1775), and the Quakers (or Society of Friends) (Keith, 1693), but a large contingent of Black Founders were the ones to challenge and hold White Founders accountable for liberty for all. For Black Americans, We the People, was not an aphorism but a promise to adhere to full citizenship rights for everyone. The racial and ethnic hierarchical structure set up through the Constitution and other legislation limited Black American's governmental voice and citizenship rights, therefore, creating different Americas. One America was for the White elite and others consisted of Black, Native American, Asian, and poor Whites. The Founders, who spoke for White America, were not the Founders of Black America or for other marginalized communities.

Black Founders Defined

Black Founders were Africans and native-born Americans who lived during the mid 18th to the mid 19th century and whose ideas and actions fulfilled several purposes in U.S. nation building. Black Founders, as noted in Newman (2008a; 2011), were steadfast in achieving three objectives. Their first purpose was to establish Black institutions to serve the Black community during enslavement and freedom. Throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s, Black Founders established arts and cultural centers as well as institutions such as churches, benevolent societies, Masonic lodges, insurance groups, and literary organizations (newspapers and magazines). These institutions served as safe spaces from racial oppression and allowed a support system that helped establish racial pride, self-reliance and uplift (Bennett, 1993; Newman, 2011). Examples of the institutions and Black Founders who established these infrastructure projects included the African Methodist Church (founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones); The Freedom's Journal (edited by Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurm); and the African Masonic Lodge (established by Prince Hall).

African American women assumed leading and supporting roles in various organizations and institutions. For example, Flora Allen and Sarah Allen, the first and second wives of Richard Allen were dedicated to "philanthropic endeavors and Black uplift" (Newman, 2008a, p. 3). Sarah Allen, for example, helped create the Daughters of Conference and the Bethel Benevolent society, organizations that helped raise monies for Black ministers and families of the African Methodist Church. African American women, who were sometimes disenfranchised from male dominated organizations, also created family and women-centric organizations such as the African Female Benevolent Societies of New Port, Rhode Island and Troy, New York, and the African Female Band Benevolent Society of Bethel to name a few (Newman, 2008a).

The second and third objectives of Black Founders were to emphasize universal emancipation and incite dialogue over the meaning of Black identity. These two aspects of the Black Founders' philosophical agenda I call critical intellectual agency. I define critical

intellectual agency as how Black Founders challenged the philosophical, social, and moral underpinnings of U.S. egalitarianism as proposed by White Founders. Black Founders promoted a moral revolution centered on societal transformation through challenging inequalities by breaking social and political structures that oppressed racially and ethnically diverse groups (Newman, 2011). Critical intellectual agency is about racial justice and how Black Founders repudiated White Founders views about Black Americans and race. Military servicemen such as James Armistead and Prince Estabrook; civil rights advocates like Belinda, Elizabeth Freeman; and the African Masonic lodge members who petition for universal emancipation and reparations; as well as writers such as Phillis Wheatley helped either to describe or demonstrate the humanity of Black Americans through writing and protest. They spoke about and against racial injustices in speeches, newspapers, petitions, pamphlets, marchers, and other public events (Newman, 2011). Their ideology was fundamentally different from White Founders through advocating for the freedom of the other and to hold the freedom documents accountable. Their words were meant to promote racial justice and contradict the racial theories of the time.

Black Founders understood that the U.S.A. was a racial state (Goldberg, 2002) that was never intended to serve the greater good for darker skinned persons. For both free and enslaved Black Americans:

The White founding fathers were not the Black founding fathers; the White constitutional convention was not the Black constitutional convention; the White beginning was not the Black beginning. For, as everybody knows, the White fathers defined the White beginning as a Black negation. To them, and to many who came after them, America was a white place defined negatively by the absence of Blackness. (Bennett, 1993, p. 115)

For Bennett, the White Founders had conflicted ideologies about freedom and citizenship that ignored Black Americans and other racially marginalized groups. Despite anti-slavery sentiments from a few delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the final document had severe implications for Black Americans by providing structures that strengthened the institution of slavery and blatantly disregarded Black American's humanity and inalienable rights of U.S. citizenship. Black Founders, as proposed by Bennett, were not only important to the United States of America as a whole, but to the development of a unique Black America that was influenced by African and European cultures. He also suggested Black Founders were not extensions of White ideas of democracy but their focus was creating separate institutions for Black communities and holding White Founders accountable for supposed egalitarian ideas and beliefs.

Revisionist Ontology and Resistance to Subpersonhood

Black Founders exhibited public displays of agency meant to challenge how White Founders constructed Black persons' humanity through written and verbal discourse and physical application. These acts of critical intellectual agency were demonstrated through a revisionist ontological framework as stated by philosopher Charles Mills' (1998). Revisionist ontology is a concept that explains how the Black Founders challenged, reclaimed, and repudiated overtly normalized constructions of Blackness and humanity as described by the politics of personhood (Mills, 1998). Black Founders were part of a long history of Black opposition to how their personhood was defined and subsequently maintained through legal, social, and psychological means. This process of fighting against subpersonhood status helped

the Black Founders challenge the ways Blackness and race was defined in the White perspective. Charles Mills' notions about personhood provide social studies teachers a useful framework to explore Black Founders critical intellectual agency and explain a deeper and more theoretical purpose for how Black Founders fought for citizenship rights of Black Americans.

The politics of personhood refers to the ideas that construct a racial hierarchy locating Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom. According to Mills (1998), the politics of personhood signifies an idea that the natural right of man is full humanity through equality but because of the politics of patriarchal societies, White supremacy, and the racial hierarchy, non-Whites and women are excluded. This allows a belief that Whites are fully human and Blacks subperson. The politics of personhood are guided by three principles: the reciprocity of personhood vs. subpersonhood status, reinforcement of racial deference for subpersons, and the resistance to subpersonhood status (Mills, 1998). The last concept, resistance to subpersonhood, is of importance to how Black Founders exhibited critical intellectual agency, as this is the approach by oppressed groups who fought against the two previous tenets.

Resisting subpersonhood status, required non-Whites, in this case, Black Founders, to challenge the moral, epistemic, and the somatic aspects of personhood, which according to Mills (1998) are important constructs for full personhood status. Challenging morality infers rejection of the constructed normative actions or the code of conduct of rational thought and what is considered right and wrong. To challenge, Black Founders had to see themselves and their cultural milieu as the moral equal of the White Founders. Challenging the epistemic is about a cognitive resistance of White ideas about Blackness and the way knowledge is received and perceived. This process involves developing a historical project that reclaims cultural histories through vindication. Last, challenging the somatic involves recognizing how the body is portrayed in terms of how racial classifications are justified. This is relative to Black people, as the body has been the physical sign of subpersonhood. To resist, Black Founders expressed through their writings an understanding and appreciation of their difference and celebrate their material being.

The moral, epistemic, and somatic were all classified as important aspects of humanity. These socially constructed categories were established to normalize the ideas and actions of Whiteness. Black persons' moral, epistemic, and somatic characteristics were seen as foreign, unnatural, barbaric, savage, and ugly. Many White Founders used these stereotyped images (Wynter, 1992) to justify enslavement and continually reject Black person's full personhood status. Whites, on the other hand, presented themselves as normal, civilized, modern, Christian, and beautiful. Whiteness became the symbol for humanity and for who counted as a citizen, while Blackness was situated as subhuman and less desirable. The Founders helped create these divisions through racist ideology and apathy, which was constituted through the passing of federal, and in some cases, state constitutions. Several Black Founders, however, reconceptualized Black humanity. They explicitly spoke out against racial injustices through various different mediums. One such person was Benjamin Banneker, who challenged a popular as well controversial Founder, Thomas Jefferson.

Benjamin Banneker and the Letter to Jefferson

Benjamin Banneker was a scientist, inventor, and astronomer. He is regarded as one of the most accomplished Black Americans of the late 18th century (Cerami, 2002; Harley, 1995; Salley, 1994). He was born in 1731, a freeman on a large farm in rural Maryland. Banneker's

father was an enslaved African and his mother was free and biracial. Researchers Charles Cerami (2002) and Ron Eglash (1997) suggested Banneker's attraction to mathematics, science, and astronomy was a direct correlation to his African heritage. It is speculated that he was a descendent of the Dogon (Mali) people, who are well known for a "highly sophisticated knowledge of astronomy, numerology and irrigation" (Swartz, 2013, p. 40). At age 20, without any formal training, he built a wooden clock that lasted for forty years. In 1788, he formally learned astronomy through books and equipment lent to him by Quaker George Ellicott. In 1789, he became fascinated by astronomy and began making mathematical projections of lunar and solar eclipses. By 1791, he was working with Major Andrew Ellicott, assisting in the initial surveying and mapping of Washington D.C. (Cerami, 2002; Gates, 2011). Benjamin Banneker did not finish the job due to illness, but he helped maintain the project's astronomical field clock, made astronomical recordings, and determined latitudes.

Benjamin Banneker gained international recognition through publishing six almanacs between the years of 1792 and 1797. The almanacs contained various astronomical calculations as well as opinion pieces, literature, and medical information and tidal information. His 1792 almanac was sent with an attached letter to then Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson (Banneker, 1791). Banneker's purpose for sending Jefferson the letter with the almanac was to challenge the institution of slavery and Jefferson's racial ideology. Later, Banneker's letter and Jefferson's response were published in Banneker's 1793 almanac and as a pamphlet and republished by *Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and the *National Anti-Slavery Standards*, in which all were influential to the burgeoning antislavery movement (Ray, 1998).

To understand the salience of Banneker's letter is to understand to what he was responding and the context of the time. *Notes on the State of Virginia* was Thomas Jefferson's only book, first published in 1785 in Paris, France. The book was a response to questions from Francois Marbois about the state of Virginia. Then in 1787, the book was published in English, and included 23 chapters or queries. The book contained his thoughts on various issues concerning the new republic including education, religion, and economics. It is his ideas about race that are of importance to this conversation. Jefferson wrote about the subhuman qualities of both Native Americans and Black Americans. Jefferson's ideas around Black Americans and race was seen as schizophrenic because he wrote passages that slavery was both a moral and evil institution yet included language that conceptualized Black people as less than human and naturally inferior to Whites (Yarbrough, 1991). He detailed and identified clear distinctions between how Blacks and Whites differed based on their physical, moral, and intellectual characteristics of humanity. Jefferson responded to Banneker, noting a change in philosophy regarding the intellectual capacities of Black Americans. Scholars, however, surmised Jefferson's response was a political one and he did not believe Banneker or other Blacks were capable of scientific work (Gates, 2011; Yarbrough, 1991).

Banneker was in a unique position because though he was free, he wrote his letter to Jefferson on behalf of the enslaved Black Americans. Although Banneker was a freeman, there still existed a racial hierarchy restricting Black American's behaviors and voice or as White people saw "free Negroes [as] more Negro than free" (Jordan, 1968, p. 123). With a small percentage of Maryland's Black population being freemen, the offense of contesting a White man, particularly a White man of Jefferson's social status could have severe consequences.

Banneker, nevertheless, successfully negotiated the hierarchical relations between himself and Jefferson, emphasized Christianity, reconceptualized the egalitarian principles outlined in the freedom documents to include Black people, and addressed the intellectual aspects of Black Americans (Ray, 1998).

Notes, as William D. Richardson (1984) mentioned should not be confined to issues relating to Virginia politics; we should analyze, instead, the document within the context of the American republic. The Banneker letter, therefore, was more than a simple response to Jefferson. The letter should be presented in a larger context that acknowledges the various dynamics of the U.S.A. as well as international society for both free and enslaved Black people. Banneker's letter represented a voice for the Black American community, both free and enslaved, who fought for personhood status within the body politic of America. It also was a reprimand for those White Founders and other White citizens who denied life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness for Black Americans. The letter was a commentary on the egregious racialization in America, and established the antecedent for anti-slavery advocacy. Banneker's response provided an outline for Jefferson and others to realize the humanity of Black Americans.

Examining Banneker's Letter To Jefferson Through a Revisionist Ontology Framework

Banneker's correspondence to Jefferson in the official social studies curriculum is used to maintain the master-scripted grand narrative of slavery that "hides" its justification in a hierarchy of human worth" (Swartz, 2012, p. 37). Here, I propose a different reading of Banneker's correspondence with Jefferson, not as a decontextualized narrative that simply focused on the intelligence questions regarding Black Americans, but as one that explored the complex ways in which Black Americans challenged mainstream views regarding humanity. To do this, I illustrate the language of the Revisionist Ontological framework so teachers can help expound on the important and complicated concepts regarding the history of marginalized groups, in this case Black Americans founders.

Identifying Morality

Throughout the letter, Banneker made several references to the morality of race and democracy. Benjamin Banneker questioned Jefferson's and the founders' Christian morality and the legal precedent they established or ignored throughout the country. The nature of Christianity vibrated throughout the document as Banneker pointed out those individuals "who maintain for themselves the rights of human nature, and who profess the obligations of Christianity, to extend their power and influence to the relief of every part of the human race" (Banneker, 1791, para. 4). He pointed out that Jefferson and other White Founders did not live up to their moral ideas of life, liberty, and happiness. Throughout the document, Banneker questioned Jefferson's virtue and sincerity in allowing injustices to happen to Black Americans. He reminded Jefferson "the arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted...in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude" (Banneker, 1791, para. 6). He then held Jefferson accountable because he understood that he must have noticed the terrors of slavery since he was a slave owner himself. "This, Sir was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a State of Slavery and in which you had just apprehensions of the horror it its condition" (Banneker, 1791, para. 7). Challenging the morality of Jefferson and other White Founders was a powerful antecedent to the public discourse about slavery. What made the morality emphasis more gratifying was a Black

American man in the late 18th century began a serious discussion in questioning and chastising the U.S. leadership on their views of humanity.

Identifying the Epistemic

One of Banneker's most profound strategies was his challenge to the persistent racial theories that Black Americans were innately inferior. Banneker mentioned this in the second sentence when he told Jefferson, "We are a race of beings who have long been considered brutish rather as brutish than human, and scarcely capable of mental endowments" (Banneker, 1791, para. 2). He set the foundation to deconstruct the popular ideology. To move beyond the deficient racial theories of the time, Banneker proclaimed the "one universal Father made us one flesh... afforded us all the same sensations and endowed us all with the same faculties ... we are the same family" (Banneker, 1791, para. 3). The symbolism in Banneker's writing was indeed a strategy that would encourage a move beyond the racial theories of the time. His almanac and his mathematical calculations were proof a Black American had the mental acumen to intellectually challenge the ideas of democracy the White Founders presented. He recommended Jefferson and others "Wean themselves from those narrow prejudices and put your soul in their souls' stead" (Banneker, 1791, para. 8). Banneker's use of the terms we and us throughout the letter did not serve to symbolize his connection with Black Americans but also worked to break down the racial hierarchy between Jefferson and him. This approach allowed Jefferson to see that although Banneker paid respect to his position and fellow man, he was his contemporary and equal (Yarbrough, 1991).

Identifying the Somatic

In the first sentence of Banneker's letter, he identifies himself as Black American by stating he was of a certain complexion that differed from Jefferson. He mentioned the world looked upon his brethren with an "eye of contempt" (Banneker, 1791, para. 2) and that the skin color was an automatic marker for "prejudice and prepossession" (Banneker, 1791, para. 1). Banneker, however, does not retreat from his Blackness rather, he embraces it. He stated later he "freely and cheerfully acknowledge[s], that I am of the African race, and in that color which is natural to them of the deepest dye" (Banneker, 1791, para. 5). In a footnote to the original letter, not included in the published 1792 version, Banneker makes a reference about his ancestor: "My father was brought here a Slave from Africa" (as cited in Ray, 1998, p. 392).

This conception of his African heritage is important to note because it indicates Banneker's unique positioning in accepting and loving his Blackness. Although he had an interracial mother, the Africa reference insisted a certain form of Blackness. Instead of looking at his heritage as deficient, Banneker proudly displayed that he is of the "deepest dye," (Banneker, 1791, para. 5), which in Ray's (1998) estimation was more of a badge of heritage, of ancestor, and of shared history. Although the "dye" is appearance, or complexion, it still defined, honorably for Banneker, the sociocultural heritage that he professed.

Discussion

It is important to understand the Founders' narrative is part of a larger conversation about how Black people and communities are presented historically in the official social studies curriculum (Brown & Brown, 2010). Scholars have indicated that Black historical characters are largely marginalized, essentialized, and conceptualized as one-dimensional characters with limited agency (Alridge, 2006; Carlson, 2004). The typical history curriculum consists of the following narrative:

Africans were first brought to the Americas in the early 1600s as slaves and indentured servants. Some fought for the British in the American Revolution because King George offered freedom from bondage to those who fought on the British side. One notable African American who died protesting Britain's colonial rule was Crispus Attucks. In the 1800s African Americans were responsible for the economic prosperity of the nation—particularly that of the south. In the mid 1800s tensions between the North and South over slavery led to the Civil War. After the North won the war the Reconstruction period was a difficult time for the South and many restrictive laws were enacted to subvert the new amendments to the Constitution that guaranteed Black rights. Black people fought for their civil rights in the 1960s. (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 3)

The above passage illustrated the generally inadequate and deficient understanding of how Black Americans contributed to the U.S. democracy. School based history curriculum also limits engagement relative to U.S. racial structures influenced and continued to influence Black Americans. Black Americans are often envisioned as subjects who are acted upon and not the primary actors exhibiting action in historical discourse. The history narratives are largely constructed through oppression and within certain historical periods of study and render an uncomplicated narrative that does not explore the total, complex, and sophisticated racial history of the U.S.A.

While some may argue the presentation of Black history is more comprehensive than described by Ladson-Billings, the official curriculum is still problematic, aligns largely with Eurocentric perspectives, and is filled with convenient silences that distort history (Loewen, 1995). Scholars [Anderson, (1988); Banks, (2004); J. E. King, (2004); McCarthey, (1988); McLaren, (1994); Trouillot, (1995)], warned that quantitative renderings of Black history (or multicultural histories) should not be an acknowledgment that the subject has transformational value. Instead, the official social studies curriculum resembles Joyce King's (2004) notion of marginalizing knowledge that includes "selected multicultural curriculum content that simultaneously distorts both the historical and social reality" (p. 274) of Black people. Black historical voices are silenced within these representations because the official social studies curriculum attempts to construct safe and noncontroversial frameworks that do not disrupt power and racial hierarchy. In other words, "Failure to pay attention to [racial matters in the curriculum] simply helps reproduce past dominations...and ensures that the White experience is normative" (Mills, 1998, p. 108). The official social studies curriculum helps acknowledge White historical characters or ideas as the apex of U.S. citizenship and democracy, while non-Whites' humanity is questionable because their history continues to be on the periphery. This clearly denotes an inequitable history curriculum.

It is imperative for social studies teachers concerned with historical equity to rethink how U.S. history is constructed and their own historical biases. This requires they rethink the traditional narration and alter the trajectory of history by moving curriculum past both a Eurocentric framework of history and its racially liberal discourse. Eurocentric frameworks promote ideas of Whiteness as the only legitimate form of knowledge. Ignored are multiple perspectives and the intersections of race or racism (as well as ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality) and their influences on historical actors and communities. What social studies educators often know as the current structure of U.S. history contrasts with and sometimes significantly opposes, the Black experience. Quoting Bennett's (1993) words that the "White

Founding Fathers were not the Black Founding Fathers” and that the “White beginning was a Black negation,” helps us understand certain aspects in U.S. history were not applicable to Black people. In others words, what was historically important to Whites and their institutions may not be of any benefit to understanding the historical plight of Black Americans and other historically marginalized groups.

Black history should alter the trajectory of traditional U.S. history in classroom. The enslavement population in the U.S.A came mostly from west and central Africa and since 1619, their material realities do not align with voluntary immigrants from Europe (Franklin, 1947; Gates, 2011 Harding, 1981; Takaki, 2008). The individual and cultural experiences of enslavement cultivated a unique Black American identity and perspective that is neither totally American nor African. This dual consciousness (Dubois, 1994) ignited the desire for Black Americans to not only prove their humanity but to also reclaim and define it. If one of the purposes of history is to understand who we are, then is the single story of Black Americans as agentless and oppressed slaves a cultural sustaining practice? When Black American history is omitted or given superficial coverage, what is left is not only a half-truth, but also a completely misleading and a potentially destructive story for whoever embraces it (Woodson, 2000; King, 2006; King & Womac, 2014; Wynter 1992). This type of curricular misinformation leads to students learning and perpetuating misconceptions for life. As Randall Robinson (2000) surmised:

Far too many American of African decent believe their history starts in America with bondage and struggle...How can we be collectively successful if we have no idea or, worse, the wrong idea of who we were and, therefore, are? We are history amnesiacs fitted with the memories of others. Our minds can be trained for individual career success but our group morale, the very soul of us, has been devastate by the assumption that what has not been told about ourselves does not exist to be told. (p. 7)

What Randall stated is based on the principle that Blacks as only slaves has some serious implications for the psychological development of all students. The juxtaposition of the narratives of White Founders as heroic, steadfast, and innovative and Black Africans as oppressed, victimized, and submissive indicates a certain “ontological lack or total absence of true (human) beingness” (King, 2006, p. 347). In the work, *Afterlife of Slavery*, Saidiya Hartman (2007) states:

“Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black Americans...it is because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery” (p. 6).

When Black Americans in history are only constructed as slaves, it implies a specific ontology that rejects intellectualism and promotes an idea that Black people were relatively insignificant to the growth of the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2003). The exposure of these primary narratives have contemporary consequences that can influence some Whites to have overbearing notions of paternalistic responsibility, deficit thinking, and over surveillance of Black bodies.

To be clear, I am a proponent of a critical teaching of enslavement that helps students understand and think about how U.S. institutions created and accepted the racial state and the egregious actions permitted by citizens. Teaching slavery should question and explore racialization and include how Black Americans fought the system through various strategies.

What I am concerned about, however, is the single narrative of slavery and the belief that Black Americans had no intellectual value, only physical. These slave narratives focus largely on oppression without understanding varied aspects of agency. The primary discourse, nonetheless, is aligned with a passive victimized narrative. It is arguable that the constructs of oppression and victimization explain why Black Americans are reduced to enslaved servants to Whites and Black Founders are neglected within the official curriculum, which struggles to find Black American humanity.

What the Black Founders' narrative does is alter our conceptions of Black Americans at the genesis of the United States. In many respects, one can argue the ideas of U.S. egalitarianism would not be fully developed if Black Founders did not display agency. Black Founders were the "progenitors of modern multiracial democracy" (Newman, 2008a, p. 5) and should be recognized alongside White Founders because they "generated a creative dialogue over the very essence of American freedom" (Newman, 2008a, p. 5). Juxtaposed with traditional slavery narratives, Black Founders' discourse amends Black history from, "how does it feel to be a problem" (Dubois, 1994, p.1) to how does it feel to be the solution. The Black Founders narrative humanizes the Black historical experiences through showing that Black communities were sites of agency, epistemologically diverse, and contributed to U.S. nation building by holding White Founders accountable to ideas of freedom.

Instructional Suggestions For Teaching Black Founders

Social studies educators can develop lessons using three primary sources: *Notes of Virginia*, Banneker's letter to Jefferson, and Jefferson's response in historical inquiry activities. Historical inquiry is an appropriate instructional tool that can aid students in their discovery of Black humanity. All of these primary sources can be examined using the revisionist ontology framework of historical thinking. A teacher can explore these concepts by helping students critically examine, investigate, and observe how humanity is constructed in various time periods and contexts. Special attention should be placed on how morality, the epistemic, and the somatic are defined in various contexts. Other notable Black Founders (see Appendix A) can also be used as exemplars of the Black American community's agency in developing separate infrastructures, fighting for extended democracy and freedom for the race, and redefining Blackness.

Providing the typology of the revisionist ontology framework for historical thinking allows for a more nuanced approach to historical inquiry that centers on race, class, and gender as an important dynamic in historical thinking. This process of democratic humanistic education (Barton & Levstik, 2004) allows students to see that their personal histories are "one of many alternatives" (p.37) and helps confront other people's history with "cares, concerns, and ways of thinking [about] people different than ourselves" (p. 37). What makes the revisionist ontology framework in this article useful in social studies education is an explicit approach to understanding how racially marginalized groups conceptualized discourse. This approach can be accompanied by many different strategies of historical thinking (Hicks, Doolittle, & Ewing, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2011; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011). Approaching text through the moral, epistemic, and somatic, however, gives students a language for how Black Americans and other marginalized racial and ethnic communities approached their humanity and citizenship status in U.S. history.

Teachers and students can expand the Founders' ideas and explore historic as well as contemporary social issues that relate to what various types of citizenship meant in varied

communities. Resources such as *Equal Protection and the Black American Constitutional Experience* (Green, 2000), *Slavery's Constitution* (Waldstreicher, 2009), *Revolutionary Founders* (Young, Nash, & Raphael, 2011), *Freedom National* (Oaks, 2012), *Freedom's Prophet* (Newman, 2008b), *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (Gates, 2003), and *Jefferson's Pillow* (Wilkins, 2002) can provide foundational thinking in regards to the framework of U.S. democracy. It is important for social studies educators to challenge ideas of traditional narratives about American democracy because of the many untold and silenced stories surrounding the founding of the country.

Conclusion

For many, the traditional stories told in the official social studies curriculum do not add up and it is up to us to extrapolate those narratives to be more inclusive and to provide nuance and complexity to our understanding of American democracy. The thesis should not exclude other historically marginalized populations from the Founders' narrative. White women, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans, to name a few communities, were essential in developing the social, economic, and political ethos of the United States as well. When thinking about Black Founders, however, social studies educators need to understand the core achievements of Black Founders included the creation and sustainability of communal institutions, a counter voice for universal emancipation and equality, and opposition and repudiation of Black identity by White Founders (Newman, 2008a). Understanding the revisionist ontological projects of Black Founders allows students to construct an authentic racial literacy that moves past how Black Founders have been conceptualized in social studies.

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Appendix A
Notable Black Founders

Name	Importance
Richard Allen	Minster, educator, writer, Founder of African Methodist Church- first black independent church, Founder Free African Society
Sara Allen	Co-founder of the Daughters of Conference and Bethel Benevolent Society
Jesse Armistead	American Revolution/ Double spy
Benjamin Banneker	Scientist, surveyor, Almanac author, farmer, abolitionist
Belinda	Fought for slave reparations
Nero Brewster	Developed petition for freedom in New Hampshire
William Henry Brown	Founder of the African Company- first Black theatre group
Cyrus Bustill	American Revolution, Founder of Free African Society
Daniel Coker	Started a school; elected first bishop of AME church; wrote A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister; started a first AME branch in Sierra Leone
Samuel Cornish	Founding editor of Freedom's Journal
Paul Cuffe	Mariner and Reformer; Business owner; political activist; started a school for Black children in Boston, MA.
James Dexter or "Oronoco"	Member of the Pennsylvania Executive Council; signed first draft petition to the federal government for national emancipation and monetary support for voluntary African colonization
Prince Estabrook	American Revolution
William Flora	American Revolution
James Forten	Seaman and Philadelphia Businessman
Elizabeth Freeman	First Black to file for freedom-" freedom suit" Brom and Bett V. Ashley
Newport Gardner	Created the African Union Society in New Port Rhode Island; Founder of Union Congregational Church
Prince Hall	Abolitionist, American Revolution, Founder African Grand Lodge, Founder Prince Hall Masons
William Hamilton	Co-Founder of the African Society for Mutual Relief; President of the annual meeting of

	Black reformers; writer; possible son of Alexander Hamilton
Jupiter Hammon	First Black poet- Founders of American literature
Lemuel Haynes	Abolitionist, religious leader, American Revolution
Absolom Jones	Abolitionist and clergyman- Founder Free African Society, Founder African Methodist Church
Lambert Latham	American Revolution
Saul Matthews	American Revolution- “spy”
Jacob Oson	Historian, wrote A search for truth; or An inquiry into the origin of the African Nation; Minister of the Episcopal Church
Salem Poor	American Revolution
John B. Russwurm	Founding editor of the Freedom’s Journal
Peter Salem	American Revolution
Phillis Wheatley	Writer/poet, second published African American, abolitionist
Prince Whipple	American Revolution
Peter Williams Jr.	Member of the African Society for Mutual Relief, African Dorcas Association and the New York Phoenix Society; Board member of the American Antislavery Society; wrote <i>An oration on the abolition of the Slave trade</i>

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