Afro-American Personal Naming Traditions

Kerrigan Black

One area of Afro-American folklore that has received little study is personal naming practices among the Black communities of the United States. Indeed, some might well be unaware that a strong naming tradition toward unusual names exists among Black Americans, even though the names of such celebrities as Aretha Franklin, Thurgood (short for "Thoroughly Good") Marshall, Roosevelt Grier, Leontyne Price, and others point to such a tradition, and to its African roots.

British anthropologist Sir Raymond Firth (1977) and others have spoken to the importance of personal names as an affirmation of "le moi." Every living (and non-living) thing takes on a special quality when named. Names give one a presence, a personality, and can be an asset, or, in some cases, a liability.[1] In some West African societies (and elsewhere), one's birth name is never spoken aloud or referred to, for one's name is thought to have a power that one would not risk having one's enemies exploit. And not only are the use and importance of the name different from that in Western society, but the sources from which names are drawn are more diverse, and larger.

Lorenzo Turner, in his pathbreaking study of the Gullah (1949), researched and reported on West African naming methods extant among that group. Among the categories he found were

> names descriptive of the child's physical condition and appearance and of his temperament, character, and mental capacity; names describing the manner in which the child was born;...names of the periods of the day, week, and year;...names of places;...objects of nature used as personal names; names expressing what the child is expected to become later in life;...names describing the condition of the weather;...names relating to discourse, amusements, etc. (41)

All of these characteristics are manifested in current Black naming practices, but to a lesser extent. Historically, there has always been a

Names 44.2 (June 1996):105-125
ISSN:0027-7738

strong African element in Afro-American names, adding support to the assertion that Blacks did not come to America "without culture," a point so eloquently spoken to by Melville Herskovits (1941) and others.

Africans, of course, had names when they were stolen away from their homeland, yet often these unfamiliar and hard-to-pronounce names were changed by the African's white captors or master to (most frequently) English, French, or Spanish names.[2]

And yet African names did survive, especially when the slave had anything to say about it, most obviously in the retention of the "day-naming" tradition: naming children for the day they were born.[3] Ironically, *Sambo* is an actual West African name, and was widely used as a name until it began to be used by whites derisively to refer to all Blacks. David DeCamp (1967) has reported on the deterioration of the day-naming tradition in Jamaica, citing the negative connotations each of these names has come to have.

Though the use of actual West African names died out for a time among Afro-Americans, it has been revived recently among Blacks as an expression of race pride and cultural heritage, e.g., *Chaka Khan* and *Imamu Baraka.* The West African characteristic which allowed names to be taken from a very wide range of sources, and which encourages originality, has always remained strong, however. Herskovits recognized this in 1941 when he wrote, "Negro nomenclature diverges in no respect more from white practice than in its great diversity" (192).

Arthur Palmer Hudson (1938) wrote of some of the categories from which Afro-American names are taken. And while the tone of the article is often belittling, the categorizations Hudson makes are helpful.

Many Afro-American names have come from the scriptures of the Bible. In addition to names like *Mary, Rachel, Matthew, Luke, Jeremiah, Elijah, Ezekial, Josiah*, and *Ruth,* Blacks named their children *Revelation* (or *Revelia* for short) (Gaithers 1929, 19), *Salvation,* and even more elaborate ones like *John the Baptist Preachin' in the Wilderness* and *I will arise and Go Unto My Father (Smith)* (Hudson 1938, 186). Yet, as Newbell Niles Puckett (1937) points out, among the slaves the more conventional Bible names were "probably attributable more to the masters than the slaves themselves" (170). An important point then is that slave children were often named by their masters. What is most significant, however, is that these Biblical names and their embellishments were retained as a practice among Blacks long after they became old-fashioned among whites.

Hudson (1938) also reports on the practice of naming children according to the circumstances of their birth, of which the day-naming tradition is a part. Examples would include such names as *Storm* or *Christmas,* or combinations like *Gladys Over,* reputed to have been the mother's attitude toward the birth (186). There is, of course, the legend of the child *Diploma,* which has been widely circulated.[4] This tradition is strongly West African, though Hudson and other writers have treated it with amusement.

The naming of children after famous people is, of course, not limited to the Black community, but it has been especially strong among Afro-Americans throughout history. (George Washington Carver and Martin Luther King are two notable examples.) Among my own elementary school acquaintances was *Charles Linberg* [sic] *White (Jr.).* And a clever example of this custom on the names list to follow later in this article is the child named *Monerletia.*

Naming from classical mythology and literature was undoubtedly begun by white slave masters, as few slaves were permitted to learn to read. These names were most likely thought to be amusing to whites, imparting a laughable dignity and pomposity to beings felt in reality to be inferior. Among these names were *Achilles, Augustus, Jupiter, Scipio* (one of the more common, and one which Blacks adopted), *Diana, Daphne, Penelope,* and others.

Geographical names were among the categories that Turner (1949) identifies as being characteristically West African. Among Blacks, Hudson (1938) cites *Florida, Asia, Toledo, Ohio,* and *Canada.* In my own experience is an acquaintance with a girl named *Paris* who had a brother named *India.* And one friend of the family is named *Luzana,* from the Southern pronunciation of *Louisiana.*

Other categories cited in Hudson's 1938 article include naming for jewels, flowers, and other ornaments, examples in my experience being my organ teacher *(Sydonia* Mae), and a female relative *(Rubie Pearl),* as well as a childhood friend named Xenia. Hudson also mentions "Basket" or "Pet" names for children such as *Cutie, June Bug, Sugar, Lovie, Rascal* and *Little Bit.*[5]

"Long names" constitute another category, with Hudson (1938, 189) reporting *Lucy Jean Lucy Robinson Squeeny Becky Wesy Tie Dunston* and *James A. Garfield Jackson Van Buren William H. Harrison Veal,*

among others. (Veal, in turn, named his second daughter Eva Eudora Madge Arabellà Love Isabella Veal). On the other extreme are names which are merely initials. I know an *L. C.* and an *A. D.*

One instance of "naming from superstition" was reported by Cecilia Hotchner (1953). She learned that a woman who has lost two children in infancy can be assured of the survival of the third child by burying the second child face down and naming the new baby for Mother Earth. Hotchner writes: "For a boy the choice may be Clayton, Ashley, Sandy, or some familiar form; for a girl, on the other hand, the name is likely to be a variation of the word 'Earth' itself, such as Eartha or Ertha (50-51).

This practice would seem to have African antecedents. Among the Kaiama in Nigeria, Turner (1949, 38-39) reports the existence of a custom whereby parents who have lost several children will treat the next child with feigned disdain, naming him or her a name of contempt, such as *dunghill,* or *slave,* or even no name at all. The reason behind this is to cheat the death-spirit. By pretending that the child is unwanted and unloved, it is hoped the death-spirit will not waste time taking such a child. Though the practice is different here, the motivation is the same.

Blacks have not been without humor in their naming (referring to the esoteric rather than the exoteric variety). Puckett (1975) reports Black children destined to go through life with names like *Extra White, Etta Apple, More Payne, Pleasant Feelings, Since Wynn, May B. Dunn,* and *Payed Cash* (313-11).

Though not a lot has been written about Afro-American personal naming practices, much of what there is has concentrated on what appeared to the observers to be the humorous quality of Black names. This tradition has been approached from the viewpoint of its being just another quirk that Blacks have, a laughable attempt by an inferior people to impart dignity upon themselves. Naomi Chappell's 1929 article epitomizes this attitude:

> Whatever propensity the Negro may have for thieving or for otherwise departing from the straight and narrow way, he feels, it seems, that he can find absolution for his sins in Puritan names, such names as Comfort, Hallowed, Ocean and Memory. Antithetical to these names are those that are suggestive of wealth and aristocracy—suggestive, in other words of escape from bondage or from a lowly condition of life. What

> dreams are not implied in such designation[s] as Diamond, Princess, Queen, and California Gold!
>
> With the names of the great folk of American or European history the Afro-American takes great liberties, thinking, perhaps, to magnify his own importance and at the same time give himself a creditable history in a land where his actual history is that of an oppressed people. (272-75)

While her article is dripping with racist innuendoes, Chappell does attempt some analysis of naming phenomena, something most writers on the subject have not done. It is well and interesting to recognize that such a practice exists, but there must be reasons behind it. I feel that there are, and further, that though she approached it rather scornfully, Chappell has hit at the root of it.

Black names have served a very useful and crucial function in our history, for they have often imparted a sense of dignity in a society in which life and circumstances have often been undignified, pride when we were told we had nothing to be proud of, and a sense of specialness in a country where Black children were not considered to be very special. For the individual who was made to answer to "boy" and "nigger," perhaps it afforded some comfort that his name was not any of these things, nor was it the same as his oppressors'. For the individual who never was afforded the dignity of being called Mr. this or Mrs. that, perhaps being called by a unique first name lessened that indignity. Thus, in support of all that has been written about the importance and meaning of names for each individual, I would submit that for the Black person growing up in America, this practice persists in part because of its special group significance.

As I have pointed out, Afro-American naming traditions are in large part directly traceable to West Africa. In Dahomey, for instance, there is great prestige associated with naming cleverly (Turner 1949, 32). And while the categories of naming discussed earlier do still exist, along with others not mentioned, what appears to be the strongest tradition among Blacks at the present time is the giving of completely original names, names which very much enhance the individual in that no one else has them. This tradition expresses itself in my own family: my mother's name is *Norisea* (Nor-ee-sa), my sister is named *Ermetra* (Er-mee-tra), and there have been three individuals named *Timuel,* including my father and my father's father, who was born in the 1880's in Alabama. No one

in my family has ever run across any other individuals with these names, and we are not sure where they came from. My maternal grandmother is responsible for *Ermetra* and *Norisea,* and thinks she got them from a book, though she isn't sure which one. My paternal great-grandparents, who had been slaves, are responsible for *Timuel.* My great-grandfather, Tom, might have been able to shed some light on the origins of that name, but he died in 1916.[6]

Puckett (1973, 165) makes the point that Afro-American names became much more original after Emancipation, especially among Black females. This would be explained by the fact that under slavery, white masters had a large role in naming which ceased after the slaves were freed. (Puckett also notes [1975, 307] that free Blacks had twice the incidence of unusual names as did slaves).

Despite the insistence of Robert Rennick that "most of the unusual names in this country are of English, Scottish and Irish derivation" (1966, 5), it seems clear that Afro-American names merely take these forms and names as a starting point. Surprisingly, Rennick did not once mention Afro-American naming customs in his article, and yet the tradition manifests itself in the names of famous Black personalities, in the way Blacks name their churches (Dillard 1968), and in Black literature,[7] to cite but a few examples.

In writing this paper, I thought it might be instructive if readers could see for themselves direct examples of this tradition. Accordingly, I have compiled the following list from the mobile library unit check-out records of the Richmond, California Public Library in order to illustrate more clearly the phenomenon of the giving of unusual names in a community with a large Black population.[8]

Richmond is a city of 79,043,[9] located in Contra Costa County about 20 miles northeast of San Francisco in the East Bay. It has a large Black population (28,633, or 36.2%), countered by 39,372 whites and 11,038 other non-Blacks. Median family income for the overall population was $8,776, and $7,210 for Blacks, according to the 1970 Federal Census. According to the 1975 county census, this gap widened, putting the overall median income at $10,353, while for Black families it was estimated to be $8,503. There is little if any integrated housing in Richmond, and most of the Blacks on this list live on the west side of

town, which is an area of high Black concentration. The following list was compiled from the total check-out records from January 1974 through February 1977. Most of the patrons of the mobile unit are children between the ages of 4 and 11 years, and all of the children whose names appear on this list are Black.

Table 1. Black Names from Richmond Mobile Outreach Project Library Records, 1974-1977.

Girls			
Alesia	Emetta	Latrina	Roshawn
Alonda	Ertra	Lavetta	Roshonda
Altanette	Etonya	Lavonia	Sewanda
Andreta	Faronda	Leshell	Shawntel
Angelique	Gaylene	Letonia	Shazzreae
Ardelia	Genelle	Loitorya	Shenoba
Arlissa	Genita	Lotus	Sherisha
Arquella	Gerthe	Loudiesa	Sherondia
Artis	Javeta	Makeba	Sholanda
Asia	Jenelle	Malina	Shonda
Ataline	Jerilyn	Marcella	Sonja
Aziza	Jetta	Mazola	Sylrena
Bernetta	Josia	Mildreda	Tamela
Bewanna	Kesha	Monerletia	Tamika
Carlissa	Ketta	Movita	Tangelyn
Castella	Kimm	Nikita	Tanisha
Cerbrena	Kiwana	Nikki	Tenada
Charmaine	Kristol	Nyla	Thomica
Chessa	Lanita	Pamm	Tiffany
Colinda	LaShawn	Panessa	Tonya
Cornetta	Lashonda (2)	Paris	Tress
Daniella	LaShrea	Patricia	Trina
Denene	Latanya (2)	Rashonda	Tynetta
Dennette	Latasha (2)	Raysha	Vatina
Derika	Laticia	Rena	Velvet
Dondra	Latina	Reshonda	Xanthia
Dorinda	Latrice	Rischa	Zenola
Earlene	Latricia (2)	Romina	Zonia

Boys

Antwon	Derren	Kolbert	Noki
Arvel	Dolphus	Lamar	Nortel
Avery	Donyell	Lamont(3)	Odell
Baily	Durrell	Lavelle	Orell
Belgin	Efren	Lavonne	Sedric
Brendell	Elijah	LeJon	Shakey
Cleadel	Faris	Leotis	Sherard
Courtney	Hosie	Lovett	Terrell
D'Andre	Ingram	Marcellus	Vertis
Daiwan	Jamel	Matrice	Vestor
Darnell	JuneBug	Monté	Wydell
Deldredge	Karleton	Naeschellus	Yusef
Demetris	Kendrick		

Indeterminate Gender

Duand	Laymon	Leicia	Shyron
Lavellie	Lazille	Limeale	

From examining this list and others,[10] and from my own experience, I can make several structural observations. The first is that *etta* appears to be a female name marker; several male names being converted to female names by its addition.[11] By the same token, *el* and *elle* tend to be male tags, as in *Brendell, Darnell,* and *Wydell,*[12] though *Jenelle* and *Shawntel* are exceptions to this, being female names.

Second, female names tend to end in vowels and primarily with *a.* There is a possible African origin in this, as most West African names end in vowels, but is might be hard to prove, as Black male names do not follow this pattern.

As a third observation, *la* or *le* are popular preceding markers for both females and males. Whether this is an attempt to add a French sound to the name, or something else, is not certain. It is, however, very common.

Finally, Black naming practices, as shown on this list and elsewhere, reflect unconventional spelling of conventional names (e.g., *Nikki, Pamm,* and *Antwon),* unconventional spelling of unconventional

names (as in *Shazzreae,* which is pronounced Shazz-er-ray), and spellings which do not reflect pronunciation, *Thomica* being an example. Her name is pronounced Toe-mee-sa.

Puckett (1975) found in his lists of college students in the 1930s that the percentages of unusual names were about 12.3% overall for Blacks versus about 6.8% for whites (306). I would guess the percentage of unusual names among all the names I looked at to be roughly betweeen 12% and 18%.

An interesting and important correlation Puckett (1975) makes is one between class values and naming practices. His conclusions are, I think, worth quoting:

> We can assume that in 1935 Blacks attending college constituted the portion of the Black community most fully attuned to White values and most able to participate in activities which reflected White values. Whatever arguments may be voiced in 1974 questioning the desire for a college education as reflective of White values, all indications suggest that in 1935 a college education represented a major value for White America. Thus, most Blacks desirous and able to attend college must have been highly attracted toward some aspects of the White value system. Name usage reinforces this assumption. (306-7)

It is my own feeling that among the Black community there is a correlation still between socioeconomic status and name usage. This, of course, would be a fascinating study by itself, for I think it would show that the penchant for unusual naming lives stronger in the lower classes of the Black community, if only because they tend to have less contact with whites, and are largely segregated from whites in their living situations. The majority of Black families in Richmond would be considered lower-class by a strictly economic reckoning. And these were families from which the preceding list of names was made.

A close examination of the list will reveal examples of almost all the categories discussed here. There are commercial product names (*Mazola*), famous names (*Monerletia* and *Nikita*), common names with new spellings (*Kristol* and *Antwon*), and place names (*Asia* and *Paris*). But by far the most striking are the completely original names.

Recent studies seem to indicate that, for white children, a child's self esteem, and even his or her scholastic achievement, are linked to the given name. Children with the more popular names (e.g., *John,*

Linda, Susan, etc.) seemed to be among the highest achievers, and the most outgoing. On the other hand, opposite qualities were found in children with less common names, especially those with names deemed by teacher and classmates to be unattractive (Flaste 1977).

Among Blacks, however, from my own experience there appears to be a substantially different reaction to strange names. While it must be emphasized that most Blacks have names that would not be considered unusual, there is a much higher incidence of "strange" names among Blacks, if only because Blacks draw from so many sources for their names. Strangeness of name is definitely relative to cultural context, and, as I have stated, for Blacks this tradition exists largely as an affirmation of self, and of culture.

The importance of names to Blacks and other minority groups is discussed by Herbert Kohl and James Hinton (1972), who refer to an incident that I think illustrates my point quite well;it is worth quoting at length:

> Recently a teacher was assaulted In a Manhattan junior high school because he refused to address several of his pupils by the names they considered their own. He insisted that the boys answer to their "legal" names, that is, the names listed in his roll book. They laughed, and when he waved the roll book at them, they grabbed it and tore it up.
>
> The teacher was probably astonished by the boys' reaction and may have felt that it was out of proportion to the lightness of his offense. All he did was insist upon calling the boys by the names they had to use on legal documents; the classroom is no place for nicknames. Besides, why should anyone take the matter of names so seriously that it leads to violence?
>
> The puzzled teacher may even have laughed in private at the boys' exotic choice of names and thought the whole thing silly and superstitious. Akmir, Arkbar, Rabu—weren't Thomas Jackson, John Robinson, and Robert Lee more suitable names?
>
> It's not that the teacher was altogether against changing names, for he could understand the logic of going to court and changing Cohen to Cole or Schwarz to Black. He may not have sympathized with those who were ashamed of their family names, but it probably made sense to him that some people would want to fit in with the majority of people in the society and give up the stigma of bearing names that differentiated them. What he couldn't understand was that his pupils were moving in the opposite direction. *The names they chose for themselves were intentionally*

bizarre in the context of their society because they wanted to differentiate themselves from it. They laughed at his notion of "legal" names because they considered the society illegal. (119-20) (my emphasis)

Personal naming is not a political statement for most of the Black community, however. It is among some, especially those who drop what they consider to be "slave names" and adopt African ones. But that is only a small portion of the community. I do believe, however, and *it is the point of this paper,* that conscious or not, personal naming practices are a *cultural* statement, an affirmation, and that carrying such a name imbues the bearer with a sense of specialness and uniqueness which, among Afro-Americans, is a positive thing.

The little girl named *LaShrea* (La-Shray) was asked where her name came from and replied that her name "came from France." My own knowledge of French and of France challenges this explanation, and yet it illustrates in part the child's (and the parents') feeling about the name—that it is special, that it came from another place. And perhaps, being so, it helps affirm to the child that she, too, is special, and that she, too, came from some other place.

Notes

Editor's Note: This paper was sent to me by Wayne Finke, who had received it from Larry Cross, Kerrigan Black's associate. Mr. Cross noted that the paper had been written in 1977 as a term project for a class in American Folklore taught by Alan Dundes. Although revisions of the manuscript were desirable, they were obviously impossible because of the death of Kerrigan Black in 1993. I therefore chose to let the text stand essentially as it was, with only the most minor editorial changes; thus the article includes some dated information, an incomplete bibliography and some terms and assumptions which seem quaint from our social perspective. I asked Cleveland Kent Evans, an acknowledged authority on cultural patterns of names and naming, to provide a commentary supplementing, updating and extending some of the major points in Kerrigan Black's paper. His Afterword appears below.

I would like to thank Larry Cross for bringing this paper to the attention of *Names* and for his considerable help in its publication.

1. Witness the number of Hitlers who changed their names in the 1940s (Puckett 1975, 310).

2. It was evident that the whites spent little time deliberating over names for their slaves, for the most common slave names were also among the most common mule names. (Puckett 1975, 11.)

3. This practice has been the subject of several good reports; among them are DeCamp (1967) and Dillard (1971; 1973).

The West African day-names were:

	Male	Female
Sunday	Quashee	Quasheba
Monday	Cudjo	Juba
Tuesday	Cubbenah	Beneba
Wednesday	Quaco, Kwaco	Cuba
Thursday	Quao	Abba
Friday	Cuffee, Cuffy	Pheba, Phibbi
Saturday	Quame, Kwane	Mimba

4. The legend unfolds thus: a young black woman was sent to a boarding school where, during her second year, she became pregnant. She returned home and gave birth to the child, which she and her parents named Diploma (so the tale goes) as evidence of her brief pursuit of the one she never received from the boarding school.

5. It is with great hesitation that I report my own basket name as being *Buttons,* a name given me by one of my female relatives because I was "just as cute and round as a button" as an infant. This name stuck (much to my regret) for at least 12 years, especially among those relations I saw at long intervals. This custom, of course, is very common in the West African societies from which most Afro-Americans are descended.

6. *Samuel* and *Lemuel* are, of course, Biblical names, but *Timuel* is not.

7. Two quick examples would be *Beneatha* from Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin In The Sun*, and *Zarita* from Langston Hughes's "Simple" series. Gertrude Stein, a white writer, wrote a short story entitled *Melanctha,* named after the main character, a Black woman. This is a very credible Afro-American name, though it actually is a feminization of the Greek translation of the German *schwarzerd,* which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means (appropriately enough) 'black earth'.

8. My thanks to Larry Cross of the Richmond Public Library for obtaining these records for me and for the observation that led to this research.

9. This figure and those to follow are from the 1970 Federal Census and were received from the Richmond City Planners Office.

10. Thanks to Liz Simons for providing a list of some of the students she taught in New York City during the 1960s.

11. One of the librarians who works at the Richmond Public Library is named Charlezetta, and I am personally acquainted with a young woman named Jamesetta. Norisea Black, after watching the televised version of Alex Haley's *Roots,* made the observation that she thought *Kizetta* would be a nice name for a little girl (one of the main characters is named Kizzy).

12. This is also illustrated on the Simons list (see note 10 above), where I found a *Wendell,* a *Kendell,* and an *Ardell,* though the former two names probably stress the first syllable. I am also acquainted with a *Kennell,* a *Claudell,* and a *Thurnell,* all Black men but of different backgrounds.

References

Brewer, J. Mason. 1968. *American Negro Folklore.* New York: Quadrangle Press.

Brunvand, Jan. 1968. *The Study of American Folklore.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Chappell, Naomi. 1929. "Negro Names." *American Speech* 4: 272-75.

Cohen, Hennig. 1962. "Slave Names in Colonial South Carolina." *American Speech* 28: 102-07.

Coker, Increase. 1967. *The Grammar of African Names.* Nigeria: Daily Times Publications.

DeCamp, David. "African Day-Names in Jamaica." *Language* 43:139-47.

Dillard, J. L. 1968. "On the Grammar of Afro-American Naming Practices." *Names* 16: 230-37.

_____. "The West African Day-Names in Nova Scotia." *Names* 19: 257-61.

_____. *Black English.* New York: Vintage P.

Dundes, Alan, ed. 1973. *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Firth, Raymond. 1977. Lecture given on 14 February, entitled "Names." Presented at the University of California, Berkeley.

Flaste, Richard. 1977. "What's In a Name Anyway?" San Francisco *Chronicle-Examiner,* "This World" section, p. 21. 13 February 1977.

Gaithers, Frances. 1929. "Fanciful Are Negro Names." *New York Times Magazine,* 10 February, p. 19.

Herskovits, Melville. 1941. *The Myth of the Negro Past.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Holmes, Urban. 1930. "A Study of Negro Onomastics." *American Speech* 5: 463-67.

Hotchner, Cecilia. 1953. "An Unusual Name Superstition." *Names* 1: 50-51.

Hudson, Arthur Palmer. 1938. "Some Curious Negro Names." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 7: 179-93.

Kochman, Thomas, ed. 1972. *Rappin' and Stylin' Out.* Urbana: U of Illinois P.

Moore, Richard. 1960. *The Name "Negro": Its Origin and Evil Use.* New York: Afro-American Publishers.

Puckett, Newbell Niles. 1973. "Names of American Negro Slaves." In Dundes, 471-94.

_____. 1975. *Black Names in America.* Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.

Rennick, Robert. 1966. "The Folklore of Curious and Unusual Names." *New York Folklore Quarterly* 22: 5-14.

Turner, Lorenzo. 1949. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.

Afterword

Cleveland Kent Evans
Bellevue University

I am pleased to have the opportunity to write this commentary updating the article by Kerrigan Black. When he wrote this article sometime in the late 1970s, white authors were reluctant to admit that African-Americans had a "tradition toward unusual names," evidently fearing that pointing this out was somehow racist, and often claimed that though the "poor and uneducated" tended to give their children unusual names, race had no influence on the naming customs of Blacks (Beadle 1973, 128). But, as Kerrigan Black knew, the difference in the naming customs of Whites and Blacks in the United States is primarily a matter of the existence and continued development of a unique African-American culture.

Black's evidence for Blacks being more likely than Whites to give their children unusual names is largely personal and impressionistic, but my own research using figures generated by state health departments from actual birth records shows that his impressions were correct. Table 1, for example, shows the percentage of children given one of the fifty most common names for their race and sex in three different states for 1987 and for 1993. In every instance the proportion of Non-White

children receiving a common name is dramatically less than the proportion of White children receiving a common name.

The other striking fact demonstrated in Table 1 is the substantial decrease in the use of common names for all children even during the seven years between 1987 and 1993. When Black was writing the article a few years ago experts who did notice the difference between Black and White naming patterns were confidently predicting that as African-Americans became more educated and assimilated they would conform to the White pattern of common names (Paustian 1978; Willis, Willis and Gier 1983). Instead it is White Americans who are rapidly moving toward the Black pattern of choosing more uncommon names. This is evidenced not only by the decrease in use of the most common names, but in the increased variability of the names which are in the top fifty lists, as parents abandon the practice of naming children after older relatives and fashion becomes a prime factor in choosing names (Dunkling 1993; Evans 1994; Fischer 1986; Nau 1988). This revolution in naming is not confined to North America; research by Dunkling in England (1993, 46-76) and Besnard and Desplanques (1993, 18-22) in France shows even more rapid changes in the most popular first names during the last fifty years than have occurred in the United States and Canada. Nevertheless, this change in naming practices seems to have begun first and be now most advanced in the African-American community.

Table 1. Percentage of Infants Given One of the Top Fifty Names

STATE	YEAR	WBs%	NWBs%	WGs%	NWGs%
FLORIDA	1987	64.9	35.2	56.2	28.5
FLORIDA	1993	58.4	31.3	49.3	25.0
MISSOURI	1987	70.5	42.5	60.7	35.5
MISSOURI	1993	61.1	39.3	53.8	31.4
PENNSYLVANIA	1987	74.6	43.5	60.9	30.2
PENNSYLVANIA	1993	66.4	36.4	53.4	26.7

WBs = White Boys, NWBs = Non-white Boys, WGs = White Girls, NWGs = Non-White Girls

Since African-Americans are still more strongly motivated to give their children uncommon names, can their choices of names still fit into the categories mentioned by Black? I have no data on how many children are being named according to the circumstances of their birth or from superstition in the 1990s, since it is impossible to pick out such names from a computerized list; however, information on the present use of the other categories can be gleaned from my data.

First, though it may be true that Blacks retained Biblical names in the early twentieth century long after they became old-fashioned among Whites, by the 1990s this situation has reversed, especially for Old Testament names. Indeed, for Americans born in the 1990s *Hannah, Abigail, Leah, Jacob, Benjamin*, and *Caleb* are among those names that will be most stereotyped as "White." The only exceptions are *Darius* and *Isiah,* the latter maintaining its popularity with Blacks because of basketball player Isiah Thomas.

In the 1990s, African-Americans do seem to be somewhat more likely than Whites to name their children, and especially their sons, after famous people. But the occupations of these famous people have changed; neither many Blacks nor Whites name children after political or religious leaders, but instead prefer to memorialize actors, athletes, and singers. The influence of famous basketball players on the naming choices of African-American parents is truly phenomenal; during the last decade the first names of Akeem (now Hakeem) Olajuwon, Isiah Thomas, Dominique Wilkins, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jamaal Wilkes, Xavier McDaniel, and Shaquille O'Neal have all jumped into the list of popular names for Black boys at just the time they became well-known. The latest example is Jalen Rose, who, while still a college basketball star at the University of Michigan, saw his name leap into the top fifty for African-American boys born in 1993 in areas as distant as North Carolina and Missouri.

Of course one factor creating the difference between Black and White names is that most parents prefer to name children after famous persons of their own race. Thus the namesakes of celebrities like Demi Moore, Mackenzie Phillips, Corbin Bernsen, and Clint Eastwood are mostly White, while those of LaToya Jackson, Sade, Shanice, Denzel Washington, Kadeem Hardison, and Tevin Campbell are almost exclusively African-American. Recently, however, the singers Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey have managed to inspire many White as well

as Black parents to use their first names for daughters. Hopefully, this heralds a lessening of racism in American culture.

Naming from mythology and literature is still very much with us if one recognizes that television has replaced the written word as the major medium for myths and stories in our culture. *Corey* became a popular name for African-American boys in the late 1960s because of the child character Corey Baker on *Julia,* the first American television series focusing on non-stereotypical Black characters. In the late 1980s *Jaleesa* and *Whitley* suddenly became popular names for Black girls because of characters on the campus situation comedy *A Different World.* Most recently, the Muslim name *Khadijah* suddenly burst into the top fifty names for African-American girls all over the United States after it was featured as the name of a character played by rap artist Queen Latifah on the Fox network television series *Living Single.*

Geographical names are a category where both Black and White parents in the 1990s are finding new names for babies. In 1993 *Brittany* and *Chelsea* were among the top twenty-five names for both White and Black girls born in the United States. Two of the names mentioned in Black's article, *Paris* and *India,* are now fairly common in the African-American community, with *Paris* being used for boys as well as girls. Interestingly, White parents in the early 1990s seem more likely to give their children American place names like *Savannah, Dakota, Montana, Brooklyn,* and *Boston,* while Black parents are more likely to use overseas ones like *Asia, Kenya, London, Nigeria,* and *Italy.*

As for "ornament" names, flowers are rare in African-American nomenclature in the 1990s, but jewels do occur, with *Tiara* and *Diamond* recently reaching wide popularity in the Black community. The use of trade names of expensive luxury items should also be mentioned, since it is primarily African-American children who are named for perfumes like *Chanel, Ciara, Toccara, Aviance,* (or even, although rarely, *Obsession*!); other cosmetics like *Nivea* and *L'oreal;* alcoholic beverages like *Chivas Regal, Chardonnay,* and *Ronrico;* and automobiles like *Porsche, Delorean, Camry, Lexus, Miata, Chevelle,* and *Infiniti.* Even watches (*Piaget, Rolexia*),leather goods (*Aigner*) and cameras (*Yashica*) have children named after them. Not all children with such names are African-American: *Chanel* and *Camry,* especially, are now regularly given to White babies, and of course these names account for

much less than one percent of all Black children. Still, the greater willingness of Black American parents to consider trade names as names for their children is one of the more memorable differences between the Black and White naming systems. Though such names often seem laughable to many educated Americans of all races, Black is certainly correct when he links such names to a search for dignity and pride in an oppressive environment. They are also a message to the children themselves which says that their parents believe them to be the most precious thing in their lives. Indeed, *Precious* itself has become a fairly popular name for African-American girls born in the 1990s.

It is in Black's discussion of "the giving of completely original names" that he comes to what is still the biggest difference between the Black and White naming systems in the United States. African-American parents are much more likely to create a brand new name for their children by combining fashionable prefixes and suffixes (Barry and Harper 1994). I have elsewhere (Evans 1989, 48-52) called these created girls' names "Lakeisha names" after one of the chief examples of the 1980s. Lakeisha names are created by combining a prefix such as *La-, Sha-, Ja-, Shan-, Ty-, De-, Ka-, Qua-* or *Na-* with a suffix such as *-ana, -oria, -ae, -iqua, -isha,* or *-ique,* usually linking them with some consonant. The resulting names are always accented on the second syllable. Similar names for boys, which might be called "Devante names" after the most popular early 1990s example, consist more often than the female ones of only two syllables (as in *DeJuan* or *Jamar)* and rarely end in *-a,* but they also are almost always accented on the second syllable. This last feature helps to identify these names as Black, since it's extremely rare for Whites to give boys names which are accented on the second syllable (Barry and Harper 1994; Evans 1989).

Kerrigan Black's selection of Black names from Richmond, California, library records contains many Lakeisha or Devante forms, and is a very good sample of what Black names were like in the 1970s. In the 1990s, *Sha-* has replaced *La-* as the most popular prefix for girls' names. Some of these forms, like *Kanisha, Shaniqua, Janae,* and *Shameka* for girls and *DeAndre, Daquan, Javon,* and *Rashawn* for boys, achieve wide popularity on their own, but it is the constant creation of new names which really sets modern African-American naming apart. To give some examples, here are twenty such names (unique since they were given to only one non-white child each) given in Michigan in 1993:

for boys: *A'Montae, QTaurus, Dequevion, Exzavion, Javarick, K-Sean, Montique, Shadario, Calquan, Tymain*; for girls: *Bregina, Daishonda, Ge'Errera, Latigra, Nequae, Ra-Lisa, Shamondra, Tadaya, Vantesha, ZaJayla*.

As Black surmises, it's probable that Lakeisha and Devante names are less popular with highly educated middle class African-Americans than they are with poorer, less educated parents. However, both my own research and that of Lieberson and Bell (1992) shows that middle-class Blacks are still much more likely than middle-class Whites to choose uncommon names for their children. It is primarily the type of unusual name chosen which is different. Highly-educated Black parents, for example, are more likely to search out names from African languages (such as my friends, a research psychologist and an artist, who chose the Yoruba name *Akinyele* for their son). Another instance showing the effect of education on the choice of a name concerns an African-American museum official I met several years ago who had named her daughter *Scheherazade* after the symphonic suite by Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

As for the research mentioned by Black indicating that children with less popular names suffer negative effects, more recent reviews (Zweigenhaft 1983; Leak and Ware 1989; Joubert 1993) show little evidence for a negative effect of having an uncommon name and some evidence for positive effects on achievement and self-esteem. Indeed, there is evidence that some earlier findings that unpopular names were associated with low achievement seem to have been the result of not taking race into account. Black children were more likely to have unusual names than Whites and more likely to be low achievers due to poverty or discrimination, but within each race unusual names were not correlated with negative characteristics (Ford, Miura, and Masters 1984).

So Kerrigan Black was undoubtedly right in concluding that African-American names make a cultural statement or affirmation of specialness, uniqueness, and ethnic pride. Ironically, recent research by London and Morgan (1994) shows little difference between White and Black naming patterns in Mississippi in 1870, with the minor differences that had developed by 1910 primarily being the result of changes in the White, not the Black, naming pattern, presumably with the motive to separate themselves culturally and socially from the despised race. But by the

1970s African-Americans had obviously turned around the idea that Black names should be "different" and made it into a positive affirmation of their own ethnic identity. Just how this happened and how much it really has to do with the survival of West African culture among African-Americans is a question needing further research.

Another area for research would be how conscious African-American parents themselves are of the differences between White and Black names when they choose names for their children. But there is at least some anecdotal evidence that many Blacks are fully cognizant of the dimensions of racial and cultural pride involved. In 1986, when I first began teaching at Bellevue University, I had a young African-American woman student whose father was a career officer in the United States Air Force. For nearly twenty years her family had been stationed overseas or in parts of the United States very far from large African-American communities, and so probably had been more influenced by the "general American" culture of the military than by specifically Black culture. Her parents had recently adopted a baby boy and named him Scott. She reported to me that when her parents took this child back to Detroit to visit their relatives, they were chastised for "giving that baby a White name."

One can surely sympathize with these parents at the unjustness of this complaint; after all, they could easily point to African-American composer Scott Joplin as a proud role model for their son. But as Black's article shows, by 1985 *Scott* was indeed too monosyllabic, too suburban, and above all too unimaginative to appeal to those African-Americans who were well-integrated into their own subculture. It had become a name that did not do enough to proclaim that its bearer was different, special, and came from a culturally different place.

References

Barry, Herbert III, and Aylene S. Harper. 1994. "Racial Differences in First Names Given in Pennsylvania in 1990." Paper given at meeting of the American Name Society, 28 December 1994, San Diego.

Beadle, Muriel. 1973. "The Game of the Name." *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1973, 38ff.

Besnard, Philippe, and Guy Desplanques. 1993. *La Côte des Prénoms en 1994*. Paris, France: Balland.

Dunkling, Leslie Alan. 1993. *The Guinness Book of Names.* Enfield, Middlesex, England: Guinness Publishing Ltd.

Evans, Cleveland Kent. 1989. "Adam and Andre, Lindsay and Lakeisha: Racial Differences in First Names, 1987." *Bulletin of the North Central Name Society*, Spring, 43-65.

_____. 1994. *Unusual & Most Popular Baby Names.* Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, Ltd.

Fischer, David Hackett. 1986. "Forenames and the Family in New England: An Exercise in Historical Onomastics." In Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph J. Crandall, eds. *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History.* Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 215-42.

Ford, Martin E., Irene Miura, and John C. Masters. "Effects of Social Stimulus Value on Academic Achievement and Social Competence: A Reconsideration of Children's First Name Characteristics." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 76: 1149-58.

Joubert, Charles E. 1993. "Personal Names as a Psychological Variable." *Psychological Reports* 73: 1123-45.

Leak, Gary K., and Mark E. Ware. "The Role of Name Desirability in Person Perception." *Journal of Psychology* 123: 43-49.

Lieberson, Stanley, and Eleanor O. Bell. 1992. "Children's First Names: An Empirical Study of Social Taste." *American Journal of Sociology* 98: 511-54.

London, Andrew S., and S. Philip Morgan. 1994. "Racial Differences in First Names in 1910." *Journal of Family History* 19: 261-84.

Nau, L. Timothy. 1988. "The Rise and Fall of Orthonyms: A Revolution in the Choice of First Names." *Onomastica Canadiana* 70: 3-14.

Paustian, P. Robert. 1978. "The Evolution of Naming Practices Among American Blacks." *Names* 26: 177-91.

Willis, Frank N., Lois A. Willis, and Joseph A. Gier. 1983. "Given Names, Social Class, and Professional Achievement." *Psychological Reports* 51: 543-49.

Zweigenhaft, Richard L. 1983. "Unusual First Names: A Positive Outlook." *Names* 31: 258-70.