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The Social Studies

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To cite this article: LaGarrett J. King , Ryan M. Crowley & Anthony L. Brown (2010) The Forgotten Legacy of Carter G. Woodson: Contributions to Multicultural Social Studies and African American History, The Social Studies, 101:5, 211-215, DOI: [10.1080/00377990903584446](https://doi.org/10.1080/00377990903584446)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00377990903584446>



Published online: 04 Sep 2010.



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The Forgotten Legacy of Carter G. Woodson: Contributions to Multicultural Social Studies and African American History

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The intent of this article is to examine the significance of Carter G. Woodson to the historical development of the fields of curriculum and social studies, particularly as they relate to the evolution of the modern multicultural movement. The authors focus on Woodson's contributions through his curriculum and his pedagogical efforts in establishing a more rigorous and historically accurate social studies framework through his community education initiatives, the *Negro History Bulletin*, and his textbooks. They conclude the article with a discussion of how Woodson's efforts can have direct implications for social studies educators.

Keywords: African American history, African history, multicultural education, social studies, Carter G. Woodson

Introduction: A Case for Woodson

The social studies literature now abounds with efforts to explicate the foundations of the social studies movement. Much of this work attempts to either trace the historical development of the field (Saxe 1991; Evans 2004) or to honor the icons of the early movement such as Harold Rugg, John Dewey, Jane Addams, George Counts, or Charles Beard. In addition, Margaret Crocco and O. L. Davis (1999) explored the contributions of prominent women in the early years of social studies education. Recently, the fall 2009 issue of *Theory and Research in Social Education* published a special issue on historical contributions at the state and local levels to social studies thought and practice. As a whole, those efforts seek to capture both the top-down and bottom-up efforts in the field of early social studies education.

However, one notable individual remains lost in all of these efforts. Save for the work of a relatively small group of largely African American scholars (Banks 1992; Dilworth 2004; Gordon 1985; Ladson-Billings 1995), the work of Carter G. Woodson does not receive the due diligence it deserves in the literature devoted to the develop-

ment of the modern social studies curriculum. Woodson's name either does not appear or receives only minimal mention in major histories of the social studies field or of curriculum history (Kliebard 2004; Pinar et al. 2004; Evans 2004; Flinders and Thornton 2004). The intent of this article is to fill this historical gap by examining the significance of Woodson's ideas to the historical development of the fields of curriculum and social studies, particularly as they relate to the evolution of the modern multicultural movement.

After receiving his doctorate from Harvard University in 1912, Woodson sought to counter the racist, inaccurate depictions of African Americans and Africa that permeated the historical and contemporary literature available at U.S. educational institutions in the early 1900s. As James Banks (1992) observes, Woodson sought to do this by pursuing the ideal of scientific objectivity in his work. Woodson felt that African American scholars had to be rigorous and objective if they hoped to be accepted by the white intellectual community. However, Woodson did not seek only to gain acceptance for his work in the Western canon. He wanted to reach African Americans at all levels of society. Woodson felt that all African Americans, from school children to college graduates, needed to see positive, accurate depictions of African American and African history lest they tacitly learn to accept the inferior status bestowed on them by mainstream discourses (Woodson [1933] 2000). Although Woodson claimed to eschew the activism pursued

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by African American scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, Woodson's project ultimately sought a reorientation of the African American place in society. Woodson sought to counter the "mis-education" African Americans received from educational institutions (Woodson [1933] 2000). By remaking the historical image of the "Negro," Woodson wanted to remake the self-image of the African American population (Brown 2010).

A thorough overview of Woodson's contributions to the fields of social studies and curriculum is not possible in this abbreviated format. Instead, we intend to discuss three examples of how Woodson's contributions helped to create a more inclusive social studies framework. We will explore his community education initiatives, the impact of the *Negro History Bulletin* on enhancing African American history pedagogy, and the effect of his textbooks on the social studies curriculum. We conclude this article with a discussion of how Woodson's efforts can have direct implications for social studies educators.

Woodson's social studies pedagogical and curricular work

During the early twentieth century, different factions of society had a persistent agenda of classifying African Americans as a deficient race. Although this agenda existed in a variety of social settings, academic and K-12 texts provided some of the most problematic perspectives about African Americans. In 1934, respected historian Arnold Toynbee said that of all the races of human beings, only the black race "had made no productive contribution to civilization" (Winston 1975, 462). In addition, U. B. Phillips's ([1918] 1966) popular textbook, *American Negro Slavery*, argued that the institution of slavery filled a necessary role by "civilizing" African Americans.

Understanding the harmful effects of the inaccurate portrayals and silenced voices of African Americans, Woodson began his work to provide counternarratives to the racist ideology of the day. Although mostly known for the creation of Negro History Week (Black History Month was established in 1976)—initiated to preserve and popularize African and African American history—Woodson's contributions extend far beyond the month of February. Between the years of 1915–1942, he authored or edited twenty books about African and African American subjects; was the primary editor of two scholarly journals, *The Journal of Negro History* and *The Negro History Bulletin*; and mentored young scholars who would later assist him in creating African and African American educational resources for teachers, students, and the mass public (Dagbovie 2007). Woodson's scholarship was a direct response to the social construction of race during that time. To advance his message about the contributions of black persons to elementary and secondary students, Woodson established a three-tier program, which included

community engagement, the *Negro History Bulletin*, and the creation of black history textbooks.

Woodson's community engagement

Woodson's community engagement component to black history was organized under the leadership of his co-founded association, The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). During ASNLH's early years, efforts to connect with the community would come in the form of meeting in places such as black churches, community centers, high schools, and colleges and universities throughout the country (Dagbovie 2004, 2007). In addition, ASNLH helped black communities and schools establish book clubs concerning the study of black history. ASNLH played an essential role in helping Woodson establish Negro History Week (NHW). Woodson established Negro History Week in 1926 to help promote and popularize the study of Africa and African American history to school children and adults. To achieve this goal, he established an extension division within ASNLH, which included a public lecture circuit that allowed knowledgeable persons such as Woodson to speak at black elementary and secondary schools to promote the histories of African Americans. This also included the promotion of black history through parades and museum exhibits. Moreover, Woodson and ASNLH established a Home Studies Department, which served as a correspondence course in which teachers would visit homes of students for instruction about African American culture and history.

The Negro History Bulletin

His second approach in creating a space for children to study black history resulted in the publication of the *Negro History Bulletin* (currently the *Black History Bulletin*). In 1937, Woodson published the first edition of the *Negro History Bulletin* (*NHB*). The primary focus of the *NHB* was to serve as a resource that supplemented inadequate teaching about African and African Americans. The *NHB* served as a guide for black teachers, students, parents, and lay persons who had little knowledge about black history to help them teach elementary and secondary students more effectively. The *NHB* was written in simple language and provided a forum for teachers and children to publish their thoughts about black history (Goggin 1993; Dagbovie 2007). The teachers utilized the *NHB* by sharing classroom experiences and by having discussions about the various ways to infuse black history in the existing curriculum. The space also provided an opportunity for teachers to share specific lesson plans they felt were successful in teaching an aspect of black history. *NHB* included pages dedicated to current events, poetry, biographical sketches of important black historical figures, primary source documents, plays written by teachers and community members, Negro History Week activities, African knowledge, "Book of the Month"

sections, and children pages. Woodson also used the *NHB* to write about issues ranging from financial thriftiness to the treatment of African American soldiers during World War II. Moreover, within the pages of the *NHB*, Woodson corresponded with teachers or community members by answering black history questions under the heading “Questions Answered.” In many ways the *Negro History Bulletin* and *Negro History Week* were intertwined because the *NHB* served as the primary advertisement for various activities related to the development of black historical study. The *Negro History Bulletin* was directly related to Woodson’s ideology that African American history should be infused into the “official” curriculum.

Woodson’s textbooks

It is conceivable that Woodson’s experiences as a student, teacher, and administrator influenced his decision to focus much of his writing on creating textbooks. He understood that the current textbooks of that time did not represent the truth about African and African American culture and history. In 1922, Woodson established Associated Publishers and successfully published his first textbook that same year, *The Negro in Our History*, which was geared toward the university student. It became the standard textbook for African American history until 1947. Then, in 1928 he published *Negro Makers of History*, a textbook appropriately designed for elementary school children. He went on to publish *The Story of the Negro Retold* in 1935, a text geared toward the high school student (Dagbovie 2007). Woodson’s textbooks also contributed to the creation of a more inclusive social studies curriculum by illuminating new understandings of Africa and of African American citizens.

Woodson and world history: Resituating Africa’s place in history

Woodson concentrated a great deal of effort on providing new interpretations of Africa for school curricula. He published *The African Background Outlined* in 1936 and *African Heroes and Heroines* in 1939, both textbooks that focused exclusively on Africa. In addition, Woodson developed a supplementary resource book entitled *African Myths, Together with Proverbs* (1928a), which included popular stories and expressions related to African culture. Woodson also devoted sections of the *Negro History Bulletin* to cover African topics. Together, these efforts sought to counter the stereotype that African Americans were a people without history (Woodson 1936, v). Woodson’s efforts to retell the story of the African and African American were conducted through rigorous historical inquiry, and by disseminating these histories in a variety of formats, Woodson ensured that such histories were made available to school-aged children and local communities.

Clearly, Woodson understood the significance of conceptualizing African history as it directly related to the construction of African Americans as a people without history. Woodson (1936, v) states, “most Europeans and practically all Americans have regarded the Negro merely as an undesirable—an undeveloped person constituting a problem in not being able to keep pace with others.” Thus, for Woodson, the retelling of African history was not simply to challenge the historical canon or just to document ancient histories, but also to show that people of African descent were not just enslaved, colonized, or primitive people—but a people of profound literary, scientific, and intellectual accomplishments. Thus, Woodson’s efforts at retelling African history were at the forefront of his overarching philosophical and political project of challenging and reconstructing academic and school knowledge about Africans in America.

Reconceptualizing African American civic contributions

Another key emphasis of Woodson’s work was to reveal African American civic contributions in U.S. history. At every turn, the legacy of African Americans’ struggle against oppression and their participation in the economic, political, and military development of the nation received no mention in either the nation’s K-12 social studies curriculum or the curricula of institutions of higher education. Woodson sought to provide a counternarrative to these widespread misconceptions. As one example, Woodson spent a considerable amount of time recasting the story of the African American soldier in U.S. history through the pages of his textbooks.

The dominant historical narratives of the time neglected to mention, or outright discredited, the contributions of black soldiers in the nation’s wars so glorified in textbook accounts (Foner 1974). Through his textbooks *The Negro in Our History* (1922), *Negro Makers of History* (1928b), and *The Story of the Negro Retold* (Woodson and Wesley 1935), Woodson rewrote the story of the African American soldier in an effort to promote awareness of one of the many civic contributions African Americans made throughout history. In doing so, Woodson (1922) associated African Americans with the lofty claims of patriotism usually reserved for whites. Woodson expressed this sentiment frequently in his work: “The Negroes of this country love their native soil and will readily die, if necessary to defend it” (1922, 514). Woodson told the stories of notable African American regiments, such as the Massachusetts 54th of the Civil War, noting their bravery during the assault on Fort Wagner. He also wrote about the 9th and 10th Cavalries, who came to the aid of Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders in the Battle of San Juan Hill during the Spanish American War and saved them from annihilation.

As part of Woodson’s overall project, this effort to retell the story of the African American soldier served a dual purpose. It countered the inaccurate, and often altogether

absent, story of African American military service that was available to the general public. It also sought to serve as a source of inspiration and pride for its primary audience—African American schoolchildren of all ages.

Implications to Social Studies Educators

Woodson's contributions should not only be seen as insightful for scholars of history, curriculum, and multicultural education, but also as foundational and practical (Dagbovie 2004) for contemporary social studies teachers. Woodson understood that his efforts to expand knowledge about Africa and African Americans would not have been successful without the dedication of teachers in elementary and secondary schools. Negro History Week, the *Negro History Bulletin*, his black history textbooks, and ASNLH (currently the Association for the Study of African American Life and History [ASALH]) were all attempts at educating teachers to carry out the task of implementing a corrective and transformative black education. Although Woodson died in 1950, his legacy stills lives on through his initiatives, particularly Black History Month and ASALH. Each year, ASALH presents a black history theme to help guide teachers' lessons about African American content. Additionally, as part of its annual conference, it holds a two-day teacher workshop on implementing African American concepts within the existing history curriculum.

What can we learn from Carter G. Woodson's curricular ideas and practices that can aid in developing a more inclusive and multicultural perspective in the social studies? In what ways can social studies teacher educators help improve teacher candidates' pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987) as it pertains to African American history? How can Woodson's curriculum model effect change in teachers' knowledge and pedagogy in the field of social studies? In this section, we will focus on these questions by providing strategies teachers can use in designing curricula about black history that use Woodson's work as a model of effective multicultural social studies instruction.

Woodson believed that if appropriate forms of knowledge were available, then it was the responsibility of the teacher to seek out that information. His plea to teachers was to be researchers in their approach to understanding African and African American history. In drawing from Woodson's assertions about rigorous historical inquiry, the current information age is a perfect opportunity for teachers to gain needed knowledge about black history. In the era of the Internet, information is abundant. A multitude of historical databases are reserved primarily for African- and African American-related issues. Those databases can streamline the process of knowledge creation and better educate teachers about black history and culture. For example, Columbia University's Amistad Digital Resource Project (<http://www.amistadresource.org/>) is an African American history database that chronicles the histories of

black persons from 1919 to the present. Its vast content is divided into three learning and teaching modules titled "Plantation to the Ghetto," "The Civil Rights Era," and "The Future in the Present." The Web site is organized by events so teachers can easily implement it within the existing curriculum. In addition, each historical event is accompanied by related images, documents, and videos to help teachers present the material to diverse learners (Columbia University 2009). A source such as Amistad can assist teachers in presenting black historical figures as agents of change and not as victims of outcomes. Teacher education programs would also benefit from providing a space in social studies methods courses for examining the various African American databases to help future teachers construct effective lessons. In addition, reserving black history materials at public and school libraries that give specific attention to Africa and African American history can provide teachers supplemental materials to acquire new knowledge about black history. Authors such as Cheikh Anta Diop (1987), Darlene Clark Hine (2005) and John Hope Franklin (1988) have all written important books detailing the lives of persons of African descent in the United States and abroad. Their works can help teachers and teacher educators gain knowledge about various African and African American topics. Children's literature such as *Bound for the Promised Land* (1995) by Michael Cooper and *Forever Free: The Story of the Emancipation Proclamation* (1963) by Dorothy Sterling are excellent books for teachers to use when discussing migration to the northern states and freedom from slavery for African Americans.

Woodson also understood the importance of fostering community involvement through the development and circulation of African American history. He knew how important the community was to this process. His trust in the community as a resource is one of the reasons he allowed lay historians and museum directors to join ASALH. Woodson utilized community educators as supplemental resources in the development of African American historical knowledge. Woodson believed that the community was an important resource that could aid in teachers' and students' knowledge of African American history.

In drawing from Woodson's assertions about the importance of community, we urge teachers and students to visit and conduct research at African American museums, historical sites, and public libraries. In many instances, the museum curators or the institutions' Web sites can help teachers develop lesson plans for classroom use. Teachers and teacher educators can locate many of the African American history museums through the database on the Association of African American Museums Web site (<http://www.blackmuseums.org>), that provides the location of the nearest museum in the area (Association of African American Museums 2006). Moreover, we insist that in-service and preservice teachers find ways to utilize community members as a source of knowledge about particular historical events in African American history. Firsthand

accounts of individuals living through a particular historical, social, economic, or political period (e.g., civil rights, military veterans, Hurricane Katrina) provide viewpoints that can serve as alternatives or supplements to textbook narratives.

Conclusion

Although it was the central focus of his body of work, Woodson's methods and vision need not be confined to the study of black history. His reconstruction of historical knowledge about Africans and African Americans can serve as an example for how to conduct similar work related to other historically subordinated groups. Creating historical narratives that use scholarly methods of research and writing can deflect the claims of critics that multicultural curricula are too simplistic and lack academic rigor. Rigorous work such as Woodson's allows marginalized groups to challenge the inaccuracies and silences of master narratives (Trouillot 1995) in meaningful ways and gain inclusion in the curriculum. In an era when the social studies curriculum suffers from a "crisis of relevance" (Loewen 2007) due to the increasing diversity of the K-12 student body, efforts such as Woodson's can assist teachers in bringing outside knowledge into the classroom to engage the growing number of students of different ethnicities who walk through their doors on a daily basis.

Although Woodson has not been recognized as foundational to social studies education, we argue that the volume and significance of his scholarship should place him with the likes of scholars such as Harold Rugg, George Counts, and John Dewey. We further urge social studies educators to examine his pedagogical and curricular efforts as a guide for presenting diverse and rigorous content in classrooms.

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