Radical Roots

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Carter G. Woodson
A Century of Making Black Lives Matter

Burnis Morris

If a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.

—Carter G. Woodson
“Negro History Week,” 1926

Carter G. Woodson has a well-deserved reputation as a scholar who worked to commemorate Black achievement, and he founded and funded a research journal, initially from his meager earnings as a public schoolteacher in Washington, DC.1 Along the way, an adoring public, especially the Black press, recognized his efforts, using terms such as founder and father to describe his relationship to Negro History Week and Black History Month. However impressive such terms of endearment, used without elaboration, they fail to capture the totality of what his life’s work has meant for his profession, education, social justice movements, culture, and America.

Woodson’s influence in the fields of history, public history, and African American history is simplified and marginalized by scholars and admirers who focus solely on his contributions to celebratory history-making, including those who favorably compare Woodson to other Black intellectuals2 or support a museum created in his honor.3 Woodson is not only the pioneer in Black history or a founder of radical public history. His life’s work fundamentally altered America’s understanding of history and brought it closer to truth.
Woodson’s work involved more than memorizing dates and statistics, observing achievements one week a year or studying a single course in school. He was driven by a deep concern about the devaluation of Black lives and culture, and he developed and carried out a program for restoration that envisioned Blacks overcoming the racist shackles of slavery and segregation. His vision for change was sweeping. Embracing the relationship between historical accuracy and social justice, Woodson led a revolution in education through which Black progress and respect would be achieved. In response to a colleague at a Black college who thought Woodson failed to recognize the progress his institution was making by offering Black history courses, Woodson explained why the institution’s program was insufficient: “I have in mind the larger problem of the thorough education of the Negro in the light of what he is and what he hopes to be.”

Comparisons, understandably, will be made to other social justice causes the Woodson program antedates, particularly the Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism of recent years, which has campaigned against the murders of Black people, often at the hands of police. BLM’s and Woodson’s concerns may also be compared to those of journalist Ida B. Wells, whose opposition to White vigilante justice against Blacks in 1892 led to the vandalizing of her Memphis newspaper. She headed an international campaign against lynching and was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Although she complained in her diary that Woodson did not acknowledge her work in this area, Wells was one of his supporters and attended at least one Negro History Club meeting in 1930. Wells also was president of the Negro Fellowship League in Chicago, where she relocated after Memphis. Woodson spoke to the league in 1915 on his first book promotion.

The NAACP estimated that 2,522 Blacks were lynched from 1885 to 1918, but Woodson compared protests against lynching unfavorably to his cause. He used a racist education system as a metaphor for violence against Black minds, declaring his program was “much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. Why not exploit, enslave or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?”

Woodson’s program itself was a Black-lives-matter cause, and it is better understood through its mission, which addressed the Black past and future, helped make American education more inclusive, and laid a foundation for
the emergence of contemporary movements. Thus this notion of a Woodson century is explored using these trajectories: (1) Woodson’s preparation for becoming a Black liberator, as he assumed the role of the century; (2) the state of Black historiography before Woodson, characterized by mis-education, misrepresentation, and omission of Blacks in history; (3) Black historiography during the Woodson years, a period in which he intervened to save Blacks from extinction or extermination, part of a multifaceted public education program for which he ultimately left academe to engage in full-time radical public history; (4) the intergenerational impact of Woodson’s work involving history, Black rights, education, and a Woodson manifesto, issued with the publication of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*; and (5) the normalization of Woodson by political leaders and pop culture.

**Role of the Century: Becoming a Liberator**

Preparation for the role Carter Godwin Woodson would play as a Black liberator originated in rural New Canton, Virginia, where he was born December 19, 1875. He was the son of former enslaved parents James Henry Woodson and Anne Eliza Woodson, born when the Reconstruction era was concluding.\(^\text{10}\) As a child, Woodson studied a William McGuffey fifth-grade reader and was obsessed with a character who studied hard, played hard, and was well liked by other boys—compared to another character who did not study before playing, was disliked by playmates, and was unsuccessful in life. The boy who impressed Woodson was successful in college and in later life—and Woodson decided to go to college and be like him.\(^\text{11}\)

Woodson’s illiterate father, a Civil War veteran, made the greatest impression on him, with Woodson inheriting his father’s values of dignity and self-respect, despite hardship and other issues restricting Black lives. The young Woodson read newspapers to his father and to illiterate Black coal miners in West Virginia, where he worked as a miner himself for six years. It is within this environment that Woodson’s world view began to take shape. He said one of the best-educated people he knew was Oliver Jones, an illiterate miner and Civil War veteran, who had an impressive library of books, newspapers, and magazines and compensated Woodson with food for reading to other miners. Jones had not been mis-educated because he had learned properly from what was read to him.\(^\text{12}\) John Hope Franklin notes that the foundation of Woodson’s advocacy of education and well-designed instructional materials meeting the specific needs of students was developed from such experiences.\(^\text{13}\)
Woodson’s father, a carpenter, helped build Huntington, West Virginia, after he moved the family from Virginia. The elder Woodson and several former enslaved people had assisted Collis P. Huntington in completing the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in 1870, which was followed by establishment of the City of Huntington. The family moved back to Virginia in the early 1870s, before Carter Woodson was born, and returned to Huntington in the 1890s. The younger Woodson graduated from all-Black Huntington’s Douglass School in 1896 and returned as its principal from 1900 to 1903.  

Woodson considered West Virginia the turning point in his life, but he expanded his world view after leaving Douglass. In 1903, he also graduated with the equivalent of a two-year degree from Berea College in Kentucky. That same year, Woodson heard educator Booker T. Washington, the undisputed leader of Black America, speak for the first time, in Lexington, Kentucky, and was awestruck by Washington’s oratory. He also embarked on a new career as a supervisor of schools in the Philippines in 1903. He witnessed Filipinos being taught about other cultures but with no appreciation for their own circumstances, a situation he likened to the plight of Black education in America.  

After returning from the Philippines, Woodson earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in history at the University of Chicago, attended Harvard University for a doctorate in history, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and taught for ten years in the District of Columbia. Completion of his PhD in history, in 1912, made him the second African American recipient of that degree at Harvard, the first being W. E. B. Du Bois. Woodson also was the only person of former slave parentage who received a doctorate in history from any institution. His Harvard education also made possible his credentials for practicing the scientific method he advocated so zealously for historiography.  

Historiography before Woodson

University of Chicago professor Robert E. Park, a pioneer in urban sociology, sponsored two conferences in Chicago in 1915 to recruit students to the study of Negro folklore and expected the students to attend at their own expense. Recruits included Woodson, but he declined the invitation. He said he was not a folklorist, and the plan seemed unworkable. That summer, Woodson was pursuing an idea more suited to his training, which resulted in his founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), whose name was later revised to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).
Park, a former Booker T. Washington assistant, eventually joined forces with Woodson and became the only White president (1917–20) of ASNLH/ASALH. The formation of the association, in 1915, is considered the launch of the Black History Movement, and for the purposes of the present argument, it also represents commencement of the Woodson Century of Making Black Lives Matter. The cause he pursued, like a general at war, offered freedom, empowerment, and optimism when few people outside Black America valued African American lives. Many within the Black community doubted he would succeed.

One of the historians Woodson mentored, Lawrence Reddick, curator of the Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library, helped popularize the saying that “the history of Negro historiography falls into two divisions, before Woodson and after Woodson.” The fact that Woodson dominated the Black historiography field for so long (1915–50) lends credence to Reddick’s claim. The first division, a period in which it was commonly believed Blacks had contributed little to society, was marked by systematic denial of their basic rights of citizenship, aided by biased, unsavory White historians. These historians were described by Franklin as “willing accomplices in the conspiracy to degrade a whole race of men.”

Racism and disrespect ran through all segments of White society during the pre-Woodson period, even among those not usually considered enemies of Black people. For instance, Theodore Roosevelt, who later would be both praised for his bravery and vilified for inviting a Black man, Booker T. Washington, to dinner at the White House, said in 1895, six years before his ascendance to the presidency, “a perfectly stupid race can never rise to a very high plane; the Negro, for instance, has been kept down as much by lack of intellectual development as anything else.”

Blacks were becoming a “negligible factor” in the world, Woodson said on numerous occasions. He also repeated the point of view he had heard from Washington in Lexington: that conditions for African Americans were so dire they might be forced into serfdom. Woodson carried Washington’s thought with him for decades and seemed motivated to avoid serfdom for Blacks and prevent their extinction. As farfetched as it might seem today, Woodson’s anxieties about the future of African Americans were not overblown. Franklin also discovered such sentiments among White historians in the nineteenth century: “In the generation following the Civil War several historians expressed the greatest grief that Negroes had been emancipated, for, they argued, it would only be a matter of time—a few decades at the
most—and all Negroes would disappear. History, they claimed, clearly demonstrated that Negroes could not survive as free men.”

Woodson respected the works of several nineteenth-century writers of Black history who preceded him—including Booker T. Washington, William C. Nell, William Wells Brown, and George Washington Williams. Of Washington’s The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery, Woodson’s Journal of Negro History stated the book was “one of the first successful efforts to give the Negro a larger place in history.”

Black intellectuals of the late nineteenth century, because they carried the burden of being Black, had much difficulty pursuing scholarship. Franklin found their qualifications and training were questioned at every turn. The American Negro Academy was founded in 1897 and included Woodson as a member. The Academy sponsored forums and disseminated documents; however, there was nothing close to a history movement until Woodson set one in motion.

**Historiography after Woodson’s Radical Public History Intervention**

Officially, Woodson crafted an intervention program that began September 9, 1915, with the founding of ASNLH. This date represents the beginning of what Reddick considered the second division of Black historiography, when Woodson crusaded as teacher, scholar, and promoter, contradicting myths of Black inferiority and depictions of Black people as society’s burdens. The Woodson cause “proclaimed as its purposes the collection of sociological and historical data on the Negro, the study of peoples of African blood, the publishing of books in this field, and the promotion of harmony between the races.”

Other early historians involved in the Black History Movement included Arthur Schomburg, founder of what became the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. Schomburg became an assistant editor of the Journal of Negro History, but he reportedly had responded negatively in his initial reaction in 1916 when Woodson founded the Journal. Schomburg had considered the publication a competitor “stealing our thunder in which we are pioneer.” John E. Bruce, a journalist, also was a Woodson ally. Bruce founded the Negro Historical Society of Brooklyn and was a life member of ASNLH. Several individuals associated with the National Urban League and NAACP participated in the history movement, but ASNLH and Woodson were its cornerstone.
Having been trained as an academic historian, Woodson served short stints as dean at Howard University (1919–20) and the West Virginia Collegiate Institute (1920–22). However, for most of the four decades he spent pursuing the cause, Woodson was a radical public historian employed by no university or college. He had clashed with the president of Howard University, which led to his firing, but it worked out well because Woodson valued his independence and seemed to thrive in situations where he was in control. As his own boss, Woodson created the *Journal of Negro History* for scholarly research articles; Associated Publishers (1922), a book-publishing firm he founded because many book publishers would not publish manuscripts from Black writers; Negro History Week (1926); and *Negro History Bulletin* (1937), primarily for educators.

Ten years into his program, Woodson said, “It has made the world see the Negro as a participant rather than as a lay figure in history.” A decade later, Jackson found the first twenty years of ASNLH’s activities should be separated into two periods: The first ten years (1915–25) involved ASNLH as a mostly scholarly organization behaving as most historical societies did. In the second ten years (1925–35), it played a unique, double-role addressing both scholars and general audiences. Jackson described ASNLH as an agency that had reached maturity: “Its influence has extended from Washington, DC, to every state in the union and to foreign countries. The Association, today, we must repeat, is a thing of the people.”

**Public Education Program**

The audience Woodson targeted required schooling in this new discipline; therefore, Woodson established a public education program, which essentially became the movement, incorporating his publications, Negro History Week, and outreach to schools. Negro History Week was the most conspicuous element of the overall education program, and Woodson believed the celebration was his most successful endeavor. The dates he chose for observance, the second week in February, coincided with the birthdays of abolitionist and diplomat Frederick Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln. Woodson explained Negro History Week: “It is not so much a Negro History Week as it is a History week. We should emphasize not Negro History, but the Negro in history. What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race hate, and religious prejudice. There should be no indulgence in undue eulogy of the Negro. The case
of the Negro is well taken care of when it is shown how he has influenced the development of civilization.”

Woodson functioned like a superintendent of schools. He created a home studies department with correspondence courses and awarded certificates. The department’s faculty included distinguished scholars: Charles H. Wesley, instructor in history, who was the third Black student awarded a history PhD from Harvard and first Black Guggenheim Fellow; Alain L. Locke, instructor in African art, who was the first African American Rhodes Scholar, well-known for his association with the New Negro, or Harlem Renaissance; E. Franklin Frazier, instructor in sociology, who was a prominent Black sociologist; Luther P. Jackson, instructor in education, who was a Virginia State College professor and expert on Black history in Virginia; Charles S. Johnson, instructor in social psychology, who would become the first Black president of Fisk University in Nashville; and Woodson, instructor in anthropology.

A publicity component of the education program led to larger exposure in Woodson’s message-selling. However, the publicity on occasion conflicted with the overall mission. He oversold progress to motivate followers. Woodson hinted at this conflict in the draft of a 1946 report, when he stated objectives would take longer to accomplish than he had previously admitted, balancing optimism and pessimism in penciled revisions. He wrote that the “public has been encouraged to believe that the difficulties involved are being rapidly removed.” However, progress had slowed from delays in printing and the unavailability of records in Europe and Africa because of World War II.

Woodson became the world’s major resource for Black history facts, responding to inquiries from across the globe. He also used his office like a university archive—collecting rare books and manuscripts—and he urged average people to document and preserve family histories for conveyance to him or the Library of Congress. He asked Black newspapers to preserve their files and turned to ASNLH members who were requested to “write the life histories of the ‘near great’ but useful Negroes of whom editors and authors take no account.”

Woodson himself was a newspaper columnist and pundit who used the press as a public education arm. Through much of the 1930s and 1940s, his columns promoted Negro History Week, supported civil rights issues, and attacked segregation, mis-education, Black leadership, and economic conditions. He embraced Africa against colonial powers and questioned America’s ability to lead the world while holding down Blacks.
In another aspect of Black life, Woodson was a strong supporter of the arts, imploring writers and actors to respect Black culture, and he employed two Harlem Renaissance writers—Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston—as assistants. Woodson’s views about Black art seemed to conform to a philosophy Du Bois expounded during a 1926 speech at the NAACP ceremony where Woodson was awarded the organization’s Spingarn Medal. Du Bois burdened artists with using truth “as the one great vehicle of universal understanding.”

Woodson was concerned, too, about whether White scholars would eventually respect African American lives. He found a little hope during his review of *Storm over the Land: A Profile of the Civil War*, a book by Carl Sandburg (1878–1967). Woodson wrote, “It is very much a humanized story. Even the Negro—something unusual for an American history—is made an actor in the drama. The Negro figures as a person rather than merely as a thing about which there was a much-regretted quarrel.”

In the 1940s, his final decade, Woodson reminded young people of his progress and seemed to warn future generations engaged in social justice movements not to lose ground: “These people whose civilization was marked by the kerosene lamp, the wash tub, the hoe, and the ox-cart disappointed the prophets who said they would be exterminated; and on the contrary they enrolled themselves among the great. What will you do in the day of the moving picture, the radio, and the aeroplane? If we do not take hold where they left off and advance further in the service of truth and justice, we are unworthy to claim descent from such a noble people.”

As he prepared to leave the stage, Woodson was incensed Negro History Week had become so popular that it was gaining interest among charlatans and exploiters who had different agendas, and for good reason. Many Communist Party members in the 1940s tried to claim Negro History Week was the party’s invention, and party members tried to seize control of several ASNLH branches in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when they openly competed with ASNLH in celebrating Negro History Week in New York.

Gunnar Myrdal was a notable skeptic of Woodson’s program. In *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Myrdal argued that many in the Black History Movement were engaged in propaganda activities, and he complained their enthusiasm in promoting Black accomplishments and racial pride was divisive. Myrdal appeared to ignore the fact that on matters of race, the official US policy was divisive. Segregation was the law of the land until the US Supreme Court’s decision in 1954, in *Brown v.*
Board of Education. Woodson wanted Blacks to make the most of the difficult hand segregation dealt them and to overcome the misinformation White historians, policy makers, and other dividers had forced on African Americans. Woodson observed that there was an abundance of propaganda, not from his movement, but from the side he was battling. He frequently referred to White historians as propagandists because they were often dishonest about African Americans.\textsuperscript{45}

Woodson, in rejecting Myrdal’s criticism, questioned the validity of Myrdal’s research and methodology, noting the Swedish author had had few contacts with Blacks. Woodson also charged that Myrdal’s study misinformed the public, and he challenged its thoroughness: “What the work contains has much value beyond the shadow of a doubt, but what it does not contain would have been a nearer approach to the truth. The world is suffering today from many ills which have resulted from the half truth.”\textsuperscript{46} An American Dilemma did not question Woodson’s scholarship; Myrdal’s landmark study clearly benefited from Woodson’s research, as a glance at Myrdal’s list of citations indicated. Still, he ungenerously complimented Woodson, in a footnote, quoting the article by Reddick about Woodson’s dominance in Black historiography.\textsuperscript{47}

Another influential book, August Meier’s \textit{Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915} barely mentioned Woodson’s program, but it did not ignore Woodson. The fact that Meier chose to conclude the period of his analysis the year Woodson founded ASNLH further bolstered Reddick’s assertion about Black historiography and Woodson. Meier considered Woodson “less chauvinistic and far more scholarly” than the intellectuals who preceded him.\textsuperscript{48}

The substance of the cause—scholarly research and education—was more important than public protest, which is evidenced by Woodson’s comments, found earlier in this chapter, assigning less significance to the anti-lynching movement. Though he was an ardent supporter of civil rights, Woodson prided himself on avoiding the appearance of commingling research and social protest movements. He supported both, but separately, to avoid confusion. Woodson insisted his research associates maintain appropriate public distance from protests and politics, as he believed he did. He was critical of people he identified as “race leaders” and urged his associates to avoid the label, fearing their research would be compromised. He was especially tough on Jackson, the Virginia State College professor who skipped an ASNLH annual meeting in Detroit to make a presentation at an NAACP meeting. Woodson reprimanded Jackson, saying, “You made a mistake in not going. May God help you to repent! You are a historian, not a race leader.”\textsuperscript{49}
Woodson’s Impact

Woodson’s longevity on the public stage has allowed scholars to evaluate his work, from his contributions to historical research to his philosophical leanings, from a variety of perspectives. Franklin argued that Woodson’s contributions to American historiography were “significant and far-reaching and that the program for rehabilitating the place of the Negro in American history has been stimulated immeasurably by his diverse and effective efforts.” Franklin argued that because of Woodson’s work, “for the first time in the history of the United States, there is a striking resemblance between what historians are writing and what has actually happened in the history of the American Negro.”

Jacqueline Goggin found Woodson’s success in correcting the historical record and his use of census data, marriage registers, birth and death certificates, letters, diaries, and oral histories in his research caused other historians to consider Woodson’s approach. “Typically,” Goggin wrote, “Woodson provided coverage on all aspects of the black experience.” Woodson was also a leader in publishing journal articles involving women. During the Woodson years, his Journal of Negro History published more articles by women writers and subjects about women than any other major historical journal, Goggin pointed out.

Pero Dagbovie studied three intellectuals identified as twentieth-century iconoclasts: Woodson, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and cultural nationalist Harold Cruse, chosen because of their outspokenness and ability to challenge colleagues from within the intellectual group they critiqued. Dagbovie concluded that Woodson “was the only member of this iconoclastic cadre who attempted to solve the problems he described with concrete, practical programs.”

Daryl Michael Scott discovered a Woodson manuscript, lost since 1921, and found Woodson was far more sympathetic to Black elites in the newly found manuscript than he would become a decade later in The Mis-Education of the Negro. Kelly Miller associated Woodson’s philosophy with Marcus Garvey’s race-consciousness and self-determination. Tony Martin identified Garvey’s school of thought as cultural nationalist, with group identity based on African heritage. Garvey, Martin said, “used history to establish a grievance, instill black pride, and point a way for eventual race emancipation.”

V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas associated Woodson with race vindication, citing his publication of the Journal of Negro History on behalf of the truth and evidence he provided about Black contributions in history.
Dagbovie described Woodson’s views as a “straightforward, bourgeois, eco-
nomic nationalist platform,” largely because he urged Blacks to buy from
Black businesses and invest in and improve their communities. Gaines argued
Woodson’s philosophy was “a mix of subdued Black Nationalist and Social
Reconstructionism,” whose progressive proponents included Harold Rugg,
George Counts, and William Watkins. Accordingly, Woodson tended to be
more Black nationalist than two of his education contemporaries, W. E. B.
Du Bois, a founder of the NAACP (which had a civil rights and social justice
agenda), and Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College and the
Atlanta Board of Education. On the other hand, Scott argued that Woodson
was not a nationalist but that he “spoke to the ethnic and racial underpinnings
of black nationalism.”

Empowerment across Generations
Woodson’s approach to history, Dagbovie observed, became “a practical tool
of self-empowerment and liberation,” and his contributions “served as use-
ful object lessons for practitioners of the modern Black studies movement.
Dimensions of Woodson’s approach can be beneficially adapted to Black stud-
ies paradigms of the twenty-first century.”

Woodson has been praised for his work molding an understudy group
of younger historians who followed him and made their own mark. The
most honored historian of this group, John Hope Franklin (1915–2009), was
awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Bill Clinton. Woodson’s book
The Negro in Our History dominated the Black history field for at least twenty-
five years, until it was supplanted by a Franklin book, From Slavery to Free-
dom: A History of African Americans, first published in 1947. August Meier and
Elliott Rudwick found that Woodson’s dreams of greater recognition of Blacks
in history by mainstream White historians and the enthusiastic embrace of
history by Black people were both accomplished after his death.

Beyond academe, Woodson had little trouble teaching audiences through
the Black press, which followed the public education program in lockstep
almost from the time the Black history movement began. Just before he died,
Ebony magazine asked Woodson to name the fifteen outstanding events in
Negro History from 1619 to 1940, which it published using pictorial repro-
ductions in February 1950. The list covered the landing of the first Blacks in
1619 through the Great Migration.

Woodson’s lifelong focus on correcting and explaining history and saving
African American lives, over time, was well received across the spectrum and
across generations in the Black community. Black activists on all sides in the 1960s found the Woodson mystique appealing. Many were attracted by his attacks on establishment institutions failing their missions or profiting from segregation and other racist policies. His ability to speak out about race, without fear of retribution, was a source of racial pride.

Woodson was political but not partisan, a freethinker concerned about the human condition, rarely showing interest in any political dogma—other than truth and justice for people of African descent. Meier and Rudwick observed that Woodson avoided ideological controversy, and Du Bois claimed Woodson never read Marx.

Many audiences were receptive to Woodson’s ideas, perhaps because he was encouraging commonsense values to save a race through popularizing the Black past and securing its respect. Still, messages of self-respect among Blacks and equality with Whites were radical ideas in the broader American public during the first half of the twentieth century.

Woodson was a symbol of the Black independence he advocated. The fact that he expressed pride in reporting that 97 percent of his support came from the Black community after the arrival of the Great Depression (when he lost support from White philanthropists) provided a certain cachet and bravado—an unconstrained Black man in an age of white supremacy. He was opposing segregation but demanding African Americans make the most of their situation. He accused some members of Black leadership of being bought off by White politicians and asked Blacks to become politically and economically independent.

The Woodson arguments were in step with rising aspirations in Black America, but progress did not follow a straight line. Meier and Rudwick suggested “a lost generation” or “generation gap” in Black scholars’ output because of social changes after World War II that provided greater opportunities for African Americans. However, Meier and Rudwick also found Black scholarly output sustained enormous growth beginning in 1960, and Black history became “fashionable” by the end of the decade, largely because of the civil rights movement. Under these conditions, Woodson’s work gained new relevance, and acceptance of his cause spanned the ideological spectrum.

**Civil Rights**

Many activists in the civil rights and social justice communities were among the history movement’s strongest supporters. For instance, Malcolm X (1925–65) was among the leaders influenced by Woodson, disclosing in an
autobiography that “Carter G. Woodson’s *Negro History* [The Negro in Our History] opened my eyes about black empires before the black slave was brought to the United States and the early Negro struggles for freedom.”

The files of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change show that Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68) embraced Negro History Week as a young leader. King was the featured speaker at a Boston sorority’s Negro History Week event and titled his address “The Negro Past.” Another speaking request included an invitation from Woodson’s ASNLH and National Education Association (NEA) during a pre-history-week event on February 3, 1967, when ASNLH and NEA were to present a filmstrip about “The Negro in American History.” King’s statements and speeches about Black history, especially about race relations and mis-education, often revealed his intellectual ties to Woodson. For instance, in a May 1967 address, King said, “The white majority has equally been harmed and reinforced in its prejudices by its ignorance of Negro history. In the operation of a system of segregation, whites had little personal communication with Negroes and without a literature that bridged the barriers, two peoples of the same nationality were substantially strangers to each other.”

Woodson and King had mutual friends who connected their movements, but it could not be determined whether the two men ever met. However, one of King’s biographers was Reddick, the Woodson disciple, and Woodson was friendly with King’s Morehouse College mentor, Benjamin E. Mays, himself a civil rights leader and influential educator. Woodson’s work inspired other civil rights workers such as John Lewis (1940–2020), former chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), later a US representative from Atlanta, who spoke fondly of Woodson at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016. In 2015, Lewis was awarded the John Hope Franklin Lifetime Achievement Award by ASALH at its centennial meeting in Atlanta. US Representative James Clyburn (1940–), the third-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives and a former civil rights leader, was the keynote speaker at ASALH’s Black history luncheon in 2017.

Mays (1894–1984) was influenced by Woodson’s advocacy of Black history being taught in schools and believed it was fundamental for Blacks and Whites in having a well-rounded education. He noted Woodson’s death in a newspaper column. In 1980, Mays addressed ASALH’s annual meeting in New Orleans with a speech titled “I Knew Carter G. Woodson.” Early in
their relationship, Mays arranged for Woodson to speak at a meeting of the Florida Association of Social Workers in Tampa, but the executive director of the Welfare League and head of the Community Chest feared Woodson’s statements on race relations would be unwelcome. Mays tipped off Woodson to avoid trouble, and he recalled the moment Woodson began his address: “The first thing he said was, ‘I want to set your minds at ease. We don’t want your white women.’ You could almost feel a moment of tension turn into a moment of relaxation.”

**Black Panther Party**

Links between Woodson’s ideas and the Black Panthers’ were as apparent as those between Woodson’s thinking and King’s. A Woodson philosophy of education, for instance, can be gleaned from the October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program. Demand number five on the ten-point list stated,

> We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

> We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

Eldridge Cleaver, years before he joined the Black Panther leadership, displayed signs of a shared world view with Woodson in his first published essay, which criticized Blacks for defining culture and themselves through White standards. In *Mis-Education*, Woodson had urged African Americans to develop their own standards and not imitate Whites’ beliefs. Cleaver’s article—written while he was imprisoned in San Quentin, California, and before publication of his 1966 *Soul on Ice* classic—was published by Woodson’s successors at the *Negro History Bulletin*. The article was critical of an American system that reinforced negative images of African Americans, views also represented in Woodson’s works. Cleaver (1935–98) was known to have read well-known writers in prison.

*Mis-Education’s* message was closely studied by another leader of the Black Panthers, Huey P. Newton (1942–89), who was said to have had a literary
connection to Woodson, Du Bois, and several other writers. Matthew W. Hughey found that Newton, who urged his community college to teach a Black history course, “mourned” Woodson’s mis-education, and his “discourse on education suggests he was carrying on a legacy from Malcolm, Du Bois, and Woodson.”

Woodson argued that many teachers were not equipped to inspire their students, but he urged the better-prepared among them to serve as constructive forces and motivate pupils. “Men of scholarship and consequently of prophetic insight,” he said, “must show us the right way and lead us into the light which shines brighter and brighter.” Newton’s early life appeared to reflect the failures of the education system Woodson described and tried to reform. An early passage in Newton’s autobiography, Revolutionary Suicide, read like his personal experiences had been part of a Woodson anecdote: “During those long years in the Oakland public schools, I did not have one teacher who taught me anything relevant to my own life or experience. Not one instructor ever awoke in me a desire to learn more or question or explore the worlds of literature, science, and history. All they did was try to rob me of the sense of my own uniqueness and worth, and in the process they nearly killed my urge to inquire.”

Another Panther, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture; 1941–98) who popularized the phrase Black power, was credited by the press in 1968 for a rising interest in Negro History Week. One of the educators who influenced Carmichael was Sterling A. Brown (1901–89), who served as an honorary pallbearer at Woodson’s funeral. Brown’s work as a scholar before 1950 has been credited with helping develop American studies and African American studies programs on college campuses.

The Manifesto
Two years before the publication of The Mis-Education of the Negro as a book, its debut was in condensed form, as an article on the pages of Crisis, the NAACP publication edited by Du Bois. It was spelled Miseducation, without the hyphen Woodson used in the book’s title. An editor’s note explained the occasion, saying that what Woodson had been saying in newspaper columns “has recently unsheathed his sword and leapt into the arena of the Negro press and splashed about so vigorously and relentlessly at almost everything in sight that the black world has been gasping each week.”

Mis-Education has joined Woodson’s philosophy with other social justice and Black education themes since his death. It exemplifies what Jackson had
in mind when he concluded that ASNLH had become a people’s movement. The book was intended for popular culture, and one publisher has estimated that more than five hundred thousand copies are in print, making it Woodson’s most popular book by far.

Woodson reserved his strongest criticism for education establishments that perpetuated racism. Woodson said he considered “the educational system as it has developed in both Europe and America an antiquated process which does not hit the mark even in the case of the need of the white man himself. If the white man wants to hold on to it, let him do so; but the Negro so far as he is able, should carry out a program of his own.”

The book was a call to action urging a revolution in education and rejection of old ideas. Woodson stated, “Only by careful study of the Negro himself and the life which he is forced to lead can we arrive at the proper procedure in this crisis. The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself just as the Jews have done in spite of universal persecution.”

Gerald Early argued that “The Mis-Education of the Negro is probably the single most influential book by a black scholar for a black audience.” Early found what Woodson asserted in Mis-Education about the connections between the study of Black history and the rise in Black political consciousness “was not exactly new. But no one had articulated it as a full-blown manifesto.”

The accumulative response to Mis-Education and Woodson’s overall cause over several generations prompted Ebony magazine to associate Woodson’s work with the entire century of Black progress. The magazine profiled Woodson in the lead article of a special section called “Giants of the Century: 1900–2000,” which included King and Woodson’s contemporaries Mary McLeod Bethune, the former president of ASNLH; Du Bois; and scientist George Washington Carver. The Mis-Education of the Negro was named one of the “Great Black Books of the 20th Century.” The opening lines of the lead article stated, “One of the most inspiring and instructive stories in Black history is the story of how Carter G. Woodson, the Father of Black History, saved himself for the history he saved and transformed.”

Normalizing Woodson

Woodson’s ideas were normalized, and the transformation was in full view by the 1970s. Negro History Week was updated, and Gerald Ford began the US presidential tradition of embracing Woodson’s objectives and proclaiming
Black History Month in 1976—coincidentally, the year of the nation’s bicentennial. Reddick had recommended presidential proclamations soon after Woodson died.99 Others in recent years have advocated, as Woodson had, that the study of Black history should be undertaken year-round.100 The US Postal Service in 1984 unveiled a Woodson twenty-cent postage stamp just months after Ronald Reagan signed the bill establishing a federal holiday honoring King.

One of the strongest endorsements of Black history by a US president came in Bill Clinton’s 1996 proclamation that acknowledged the cause, though not Woodson by name: “While previous generations read textbooks that told only part of our Nation’s story, materials have been developed in recent years that give our students a fuller picture—textured and deepened by new characters and themes. African American History Month provides a special opportunity for teachers and schools to celebrate this ongoing process and to focus on the many African Americans whose lives have shaped our common experience.”101

Barack Obama, the first Black president, proclaimed Black History Month his first February in office in 2009 and paid respect to Woodson by name: “Since Carter G. Woodson first sought to illuminate the African American experience, each February we pause to reflect on the contributions of this community to our national identity. The history is one of struggle for the recognition of each person’s humanity as well as an influence on the broader American culture.”102

**Education and Black History**

After King’s assassination in 1968, collegiate departments offering Black history courses grew substantially. In American schools, Black History Month became a school-year fundamental. Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano found that “Black History Month still reigns as the crowning example of curricular change” and described Black History Month as a model for gaining access to curricula.103

Based on their survey involving students and questions about the most famous people in American history, Wineburg and Monte-Sano concluded, “Some eighty years after Woodson initiated Negro History Week, Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks have emerged as the two most famous figures in American history, with Harriet Tubman close behind.”104 Others in the top ten, in order, were Susan B. Anthony, Benjamin Franklin, Amelia Earhart, Oprah Winfrey, Marilyn Monroe, Thomas Edison, and Albert Einstein.
Separately, the *New York Times*, in a delayed obituary of Ida B. Wells, stated that many historians consider her the most famous Black woman of her lifetime,¹⁰⁵ and the Museum of African American History in Boston honored the memory of Frederick Douglass with an exhibit that named him the most photographed American of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁶

Researchers have recognized Woodson for his involvement in social studies and community engagement. LaGarret King, Ryan Crowley, and Anthony Brown argued that the “volume and significance” of Woodson’s scholarship “should place him with the likes of scholars such as Harold Rugg, George Counts, and John Dewey” and urged “social studies educators to examine his pedagogical and curricular efforts as a guide for presenting diverse and rigorous content in classrooms.”¹⁰⁷

Woodson’s ideas, of course, have not been universally followed. Just as Woodson and Newton experienced during their times, many educators have difficulty reaching minority students because they often fail to present lessons in terms that relate to their students’ environments. Woodson addressed such problems in an allegory involving a businessman in the Philippines with no prior teaching experience, who, Woodson said, out-taught instructors from America’s best schools:

He filled the schoolroom with thousands of objects from the pupil’s environment. In the beginning he did not use books very much, because those supplied were not adapted to the needs of the children. He talked about the objects around them. Everything was presented objectively. When he took up the habits of the snake he brought the reptile to the school for demonstration. When he taught the crocodile he had one there. In teaching the Filipinos music he did not sing “Come shake the Apple-Tree.” They had never seen such an object. He taught them to sing “Come shake the Lomboy Tree,” something which they had actually done.¹⁰⁸

The Filipino example even today is applicable to learning in many classrooms and disciplines. Jeffery Menzise, for instance, suggested psychology professors should expose students to the works of Black scholars and studies involving Africa: “When studying Carl G. Jung, does the professor include Jung’s studies in East African spiritual cultures, and his statements of the power and understanding he embraced because of these experiences? In this author’s experience, it is rarely a part of this basis study [of psychology],
yet, whenever it is included and given equal respect, the students of African
descent benefit greatly.”

Pop Culture
The Woodson name has high recognition among Black intellectuals, educa-
tors, and opinion leaders, but it is not a name often recognized among the
broad American public. Still, Woodson’s ideas are popular.

In pop culture, Raymond Winbush found, Lauryn Hill’s album *The Mise-
ducation of Lauryn Hill* was an unambiguous, intergenerational reference to
Woodson’s *Mis-Education*. The phrase has come to symbolize people who
have been misled, abused, or misguided. Winbush noted the album “echoes
Woodson’s central theme of how African American people are deliberately
propagandized to unlearn their African self and to imbibe large doses of white
supremacy in all that they do.”

Author Vashti Harrison was inspired by Woodson and her understanding of
Black History Month to write the book *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black His-
tory*. Harrison, in a television appearance, expressed her inspiration in a tone
and style that would remind readers of Woodson urging members of ASNLH
to write stories about “near great” Negroes. She stated, “The theme of Black
History Month when Carter G. Woodson started it was to highlight the stories
that are not so big in the mainstream and often neglected throughout history.”

The National Museum of African American History and Culture opened
with bipartisan support a century after first being proposed in 1916. Shortly
before its opening, the museum’s founding director, Lonnie Bunch III, eluci-
dating like Woodson explaining how Black history is history, stated, “This
is not a black museum. This is a museum that uses one culture to understand
what it means to be an American.”

Conclusion
As a pioneer in Black history and radical public history, Carter G. Woodson
set out to reeducate America, return Black achievements to history books,
and prevent Blacks from becoming extinct. Beginning more than a century ago,
Woodson’s cause, the rehabilitation of African Americans’ image and an edu-
cation system that did not serve them, has had profound effects on America’s
race relations, culture, and overall education. Woodson’s resulting legacy also
influenced contemporary movements—providing intellectual stimulation,
advocating respect for humanity, and demonstrating how to effect change
with a cause based on truth, practical ideas, and steadfastness.
The cause Woodson pursued, primarily as a radical public historian not directly affiliated with any academic institution, confronted conditions that endangered the well-being of generations of African Americans, and he sought redress with a well-designed public education program that continues to inspire African Americans and others. He expanded public knowledge about the Black past and weaponized ideas about the possibility of positive change.

Many activists and scholars from all sectors adopted Woodson’s cause as well as his methods, which helped reshape American thought on race. Woodson’s ideas also influenced curricular changes in the teaching of history in American schools—so much so that, in at least one study, schoolchildren named several Black figures as the most famous Americans in history, speaking volumes about the impact of Woodson’s Negro History Week and Black History Month. Only infants among the more than three hundred million Americans today can escape annual celebrations of Black history—but not for long, because they will soon be introduced to Black history as students and media consumers.

A century ago, there was consensus that Black lives did not matter to mainstream America, and it was widely believed Blacks had not accomplished much throughout history. However, the force of a century of Woodson’s ideas weakened such thinking. As a scholar and cheerleader, Woodson argued that Blacks had great achievements in the past, and everyone would learn about them when the truth is revealed. Unshackled, he argued, African Americans would prosper. When Woodson began the movement, few people could have imagined Black Nobel Prize winners, a Black president of the US, or a Black artist’s painting being bought for $110.5 million.

This chapter does not argue that Woodson and his movement solved America’s race problems, but it does suggest Woodson helped provide African Americans and social justice movements with important tools. His work gifted them a script for arguing that Black lives matter and a road map to unleashing the power of grassroots organizing and opportunities for social change. To the history profession, which played a role in devaluing Black lives, Woodson left the possibility for redemption and atonement: he showed fellow historians how to rededicate themselves to truth.

Rather than disappearing after his passing, Woodson’s ideas continued to flourish. The resulting stimulus provided by his ideas still resonate and have helped maintain his relevance. The seeds sowed during the first half of what should be called the Woodson Century of Making Black Lives Matter have
provided a commonality and nexus that now run deeply through classrooms and American culture. They have brought him recognition among many mainstream historians and influencers whose ranks shunned him when he began prosecuting his cause. Even his old Washington, DC, home office—where he died on April 3, 1950, at seventy-four—has been restored as a National Historic Site, which was opened to the public by the National Park Service in 2017. Nearby is the Carter G. Woodson Memorial Park, which includes a bronze statue of his likeness.

The significance of Woodson’s program—once considered unlikely to succeed because it was bold, inclusive, and radical enough to advocate that Black lives matter—now is widely accepted as both mainstream and inspirational.

Notes

4 Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; repr., n.p.: Seven Treasures, 2010), loc. 101 of 2437, Kindle.
9 Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 169.
14 Morris, “Carter G. Woodson.”
Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 1849.


Franklin, “Place of Carter G. Woodson,” 174.


Woodson, “Ten Years of Collecting,” 600.


Woodson, “Ten Years of Collecting,” 598.


Carter G. Woodson, “Negro Writers Loafing,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 17, 1932, 6A.
45 “Chicagoleans Hear Dr. Woodson,” Chicago Defender, February 17, 1940, 12.
49 Carter G. Woodson, letter to Luther P. Jackson, November 2, 1943, Luther Porter Jackson Papers, 1772–1960, Accession #1952-l (35:988), Special Collections and Archives, Johnston Memorial Library, Virginia State University, Petersburg.
50 Franklin, “Place of Carter G. Woodson,” 176.
51 Franklin, “New Negro History,” 95.
53 Goggin, 365.
57 Martin, Race First, 85. Woodson on occasion seemed to personify such thinking, urging Blacks to establish ties to their African heritage, but he did not support Garvey’s thinking on relocating Blacks to Africa. Woodson sought their full recognition as American citizens with equal rights. Woodson also did not use Black history simply to establish grievances; he brought social justice arguments against oppressors for valid reasons, and the sleights to Blacks in history he confronted were well researched.
59 Dagbovie, Early Black History Movement, 72.

61 Scott, introduction to Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal, xxv.

62 Dagbovie, Early Black History Movement, 62.


64 Meier and Rudwick, 1.

65 The fifteen events, in order, on Woodson’s Ebony list are as follows: the arrival of Blacks at Jamestown, Crispus Attucks at the Boston Massacre, Peter Salem at the Battle of Bunker Hill, the passing of the Northwest Territory Ordinance of 1787, the Missouri Compromise, Nat Turner’s insurrection, the growth of the abolitionist movement, the launching of the Underground Railroad, the 1850 omnibus bill, the Dred Scott decision, the Civil War; the Reconstruction era, the first Black exodus from the South (1877), the Booker T. Washington era, and the Great Migration. Morris, Carter G. Woodson, 118; Carter G. Woodson “The 15 Outstanding Events in Negro History,” Ebony 5, no. 4 (1950): 42–46.

66 Meier and Rudwick, Black History, 280.

67 Dagbovie, Early Black History Movement, 23.

68 Woodson, “Dangers of Political Leadership.”


70 Meier and Rudwick, Black History, 124.

71 Meier and Rudwick, 161.


77 Gaines, “Educational Thought of Mays,” 286.


79 Benjamin E. Mays, “I Knew Carter G. Woodson,” New Orleans, LA, October 18, 1980, Benjamin E. Mays Papers, Speeches box 10, Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.
80 Mays.
83 Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 101.
86 Hughey, 210.
87 Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 1762.
88 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 22.
94 Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 139.
95 Woodson, 120.

104 Wineburg and Monte-Sano, 1193.


108 Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, loc. 1849.


110 Raymond Winbush, foreword to Menzise, *Dumbin’ Down*, i–iii.


113 Woodson, “Celebration,” 105.

